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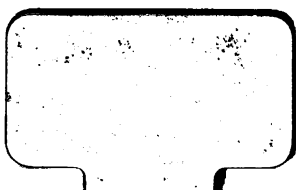
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**A MATTER-OF-FACT GIRL.**

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# A MATTER-OF-FACT GIRL.

BY  
THEO. GIFT,

AUTHOR OF "PRETTY MISS BELLEW," "TRUE TO HER TRUST,"  
ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



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A MATTER-OF-FACT GIRL.



# A MATTER-OF-FACT GIRL.

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## CHAPTER I.

### RANDAL WRITES HIS LETTER.

As Captain Comyns leaves Mrs. Bruce's house he is conscious of a great wish that the question should be settled. The mariner who has been long tossed about by all manner of buffeting seas is glad to drop anchor in any port; and if she can clear herself, if she was deceived as well as he, how easy it will make all the rest. There will be nothing for him then but to ask her to marry him as soon as her year of widow-

hood is over; and, despite the check to his vanity which Berrie has so lately given him, he cannot have many doubts as to her answer. His future life will be settled then; his father pleased; and—and he might do worse for himself. She is very beautiful.

He dines with the Parkers therefore; but without much result, save an annoying sense of tantalisation and renewed disappointment. True, Vivian is given him to take down to dinner, and sits at his side through four or five tolerably long courses; but it is hardly possible to any man, least of all to Randal Comyns, to ask a lady why she deserted him between spoonfuls of white soup or invitations to ice puddings and méringues; while, when he and the other gentlemen repair to the drawing-room later, he finds Vivian block-

aded between a big table and General Parker's mamma (in deference to the young widow's recent weeds, the dinner is a strictly family one), and thereupon falls an easy prey to the general himself, who is delighted to secure a fresh listener to his opinion of the shameful way in which they are managing matters in Afghanistan, and takes care not to let him go again. He has the mortification, therefore, of seeing Frank St. Clair take old Mrs. Parker's place, when that venerable lady is whisked away by her impetuous daughter-in-law; and so well does the barrister seem to know how to entertain his beautiful cousin that Randal, hearing through all the general's interminable monologue the rippling murmur of that low-voiced conversation in the opposite corner, and catching an occasional glimpse of Vivian's statue-like face, lit up



by more real interest and vivacity than he has often seen it, feels a twinge of something which, if he did not consider himself quite past "that sort of thing," he might recognise as akin to the green-eyed monster, jealousy. It is positively not till they are all leaving that he gets a word with his old love himself. She has come up to him without his hearing her, and interrupts something he is saying to Bee Parker about leaving town immediately, by asking in her low, soft voice :

"What is that, Randal? Surely you are not going back to Norfolk at once?"

It is said with the sweetest intonation, one which, coming from her, makes the words seem a prayer and a reproach; but he looks away from her and answers gruffly:

"Indeed I am. This business of my father's seems going to prolong itself indeter-

minately. The fact is our mining agent in the North is swindling us, and keeps there out of reach, so that it is no use my waiting for him here. Besides, I promised my father not to be more than a week or ten days away."

"And you never break a promise, I know," Vivian says slowly. "Yes, you did once—when you promised to come and see me in Paris. Randal, I often wondered why—— Why did you never do so?"

"Do you really want to know?" Randal asks in the same low tone, but looking at her now, a flash of scorn, not for her only, in his eyes. "Because I was a wise man; wiser than I am to-day; and you—you talk of broken promises! Tell me then——"

"Oh, not now!" she almost whispers, putting up her hand to check him, and

glancing round with an air of nervous entreaty. "Not before them! And I have suffered so much. I thought you had forgiven."

"I want to forgive," Randal answers with a stringent emphasis on the words, which seems to imply more; but there the brief conversation comes to an end. Frank is asking from the door:

"Are you coming my way, Randal?" while Bee Parker screams after her husband, who is taking his mother downstairs:

"General, you're never going to the door with this east wind and your bronchitis so bad already! Captain Comyns or Frank will put mamma into her carriage; won't you, Captain Comyns?"

And of course Captain Comyns says nothing will make him happier than to do so. That is part of the jargon of society

which used to irritate Barberry's truthfulness so keenly ; but he does not bless Mrs. Parker for obliging him to hasten his adieus ; and as he accompanies Frank St. Clair down the street a few minutes later he is conscious of being in a somewhat nervous, excited mood, which indisposes him to talk, and makes him grateful to his friend for an equal exhibition of taciturnity. Frank, indeed, is unusually silent, and wears a brow which Mrs. Parker might justly characterise as "scowling ;" so the two men pace the ever dusty, never silent London streets in absolute speechlessness, until as they turn under the archway of his own quiet court in the Temple the barrister lifts his head to ask abruptly :

"I suppose it is all settled between you and—her now ?"

"Then you suppose wrong," Randal

answers, with a sharpness which serves as a 'scape valve for some of the pent-up irritation within. "Though I must say, old fellow, that you and your sister seem equally bent on forcing the assumption on till you make it a truth. As a matter of fact, however, I have never had five minutes' talk with Mrs. Bruce by herself yet. In her own house she seems to have an endless *répertoire* of visitors; and I need hardly ask you whether I had much opportunity of speaking to her at your sister's this evening."

"Perhaps not." There is a dull flush on the barrister's thin cheek, and for the moment his lips tremble with an irrepressible smile. The next it is gone, however, and he adds in his usual tone: "You might have been liable to interruptions at any rate. I can't pity you though, for, according to my experience, if a man wants to

make opportunities for speaking to a woman he can. But I suppose you think you have the ball at your feet, and can play with it at your leisure. It's the way with you lucky fellows. Are you coming in?"

"Not to-night, thanks. I'm tired. Pray how do you define a lucky fellow?"

"Don't ask me now. I've got a beastly case in hand, which is of more importance than feeding your vanity. If you don't appreciate your luck you ought to. Good night."

He unlocks his own door as he speaks and goes in, shutting it after him rather sharply; and Randal turns away to go to his own hotel muttering:

"What's amiss with old Frank to make him turn so rusty all of a sudden? Surely he can't have a *penchant* for Vivian himself! If I thought that—— Bah! he would

never push my interest with her as he does if it were so. What put such an absurd idea in my head? But it is a little aggravating when a fellow won't let you alone to manage your own affairs for yourself, but will keep thrusting his nose in and egging you on at every turn."

And, being aggravated, Randal takes some care to avoid his friend and his friend's sister for the next two days, and is gratified when on the third day he suddenly comes upon Vivian in a quiet part of the Park, driving in her little pony-carriage, with only Mrs. Parker's small daughter for a companion. The child recognises him at once, and hails him unceremoniously; and thus encouraged, Randal crosses the road to speak to them, and is informed by Miss Ethel Parker, with all her mother's volubility, that "cousin" is taking her to look at the

dear little ducks on the Serpentine, and has just promised to get out and walk, so that they may have a better view of the aquatic gambols of her favourites. "So you can lift me down," she says, extending her thin, rat-like arms to him—(are Indian children all cast in the same attenuated mould?)—and having complied with the request, Randal turns to Vivian and offers her his hand, saying :

"May I help you now?"

"Thank you, but I don't know ——"

She hesitates, and there is a faint spot of colour on the smooth oval of her cheek. "If I were sure she would not tumble in——"

"Which she is certain to do unless you are there to look after her. Let me assist you," and there is a tone in his voice which says so plainly : "I will speak to you now,



and you've got to hear me," that Vivian yields, and lets him help her to alight and walk beside her over the grass to the water, beside which little Miss Ethel is already capering.

"Thank you," Randal says then, very quietly. "I wanted to talk to you, and I couldn't before your groom. It seems strange though to be walking at your side again after all these years. Vivian, do you ever think of how we stood to one another when we last did so?"

"Ah, hush! How can you ask me!" she says faintly; but Randal is not to be silenced.

"You leant on my arm then. You had on a white dress, with a bunch of roses in the bosom; and when I—kissed you, one of the roses had all its petals shaken over your skirts. You were engaged to

me then, you know ; you were my betrothed wife. What are you now ? Another man's widow ? That would seem strange if there were no explanation for it. Can you give me none ? ”

He says all this in a slow hard voice, pausing for an answer at the end, with his face turned full on her : and at first Vivian does not speak. Her head is bent and her eyes averted. It is not till a full minute has elapsed that she says, very low, and with a sound as of tears behind her voice :

“ Is not my being with you now a sufficient one ? Randal, you used to be generous ! ”

“ I used to be many things till you changed me, and by your falsehood made me what I am. You might change me again, perhaps, if—— Answer me one question at any rate. I have a right to ask it, for I loved you ; you belonged to me,

and you gave yourself to another man. What made you do so? Frank St. Clair tells me a long story as to your being deceived by your father and sister into the belief that at the time of my parting with you I was actually entangled with another woman; a woman whose existence was an insult to you; and you—you yourself hinted at something of the sort that day I met you in Paris. Is it true? Did they commit this damned treachery, and lie to you as——”

“Randal! Captain Comyns, my father is *dead!*” She has drawn herself up, and interrupts his fierce vehemence of appeal with a sudden assumption of wounded feeling and dignity which, because he is a gentleman, silences and almost shames him, as though he had profaned something sacred. “He may have been unjust to

you, to us," she adds, seeing the effect, and enhancing it by an increased agitation of manner; "but he loved me, loved me fondly, foolishly perhaps; and he was my father. What do you wish me to tell you of him? If you have heard the whole story from Frank, need you ask me to blacken him further: me, his daughter? Be generous, Randal. Remember he is in his grave while we live and are together; and as for my poor, erring sister, well, it is true she did distrust and dislike you. She set herself to separate us, and she succeeded; but believe me she has bitterly repented it long ago. I have forgiven her, and would you, a man, be less generous and seek to humble her more by making me—— Oh, no! Randal, I know you better than that. You would be the first to despise me if I sought to win your

pardon by accusing others weaker and more helpless than myself. Besides, what good would it do you? If I had been wilfully false to you in the past—if you could credit me as such—might I not be the same now? Others know how it was. Frank, Beatrice, they do me justice; but you——”

She had been hurrying out the words with an emotion, almost a passion, of which he had not thought her capable; hastening back towards the pony-carriage the while with rapid steps. The last word is broken by a sob, which seems to choke her, just as they come within earshot of the groom, and which effectually prevents Randal from answering.

The yellow fallen leaves rustle under her hurried steps, and fleck the sombre crape of her gown. Little Ethel runs after them,

filling the air with complaints at having been torn so soon from her beloved ducks.

There is an odd feeling in Randal's head as if it were he who had been arraigned and called upon to plead "guilty or not guilty;" but, as still silent, he finds himself obliged to give Vivian his hand to help her into her seat, her slender fingers close warmly over it, and she whispers :

"Forgive me ; but you pained me, and I forgive you. I believe in you with all my soul. Do not, in common kindness, come to see me again unless you can tell me that you do the same in me."

When Captain Comyns goes to bed that night his mind is made up. He cannot tell Vivian that he trusts her even yet. There is an indefinable something in her manner, even when apparently roused as

he has never seen it before, which prevents him from putting actual faith in her as he would fain do ; but, for all that, he has determined to risk it. When all is said and done what better is there before him ? and if she wishes it—if she likes him ! Perhaps there may be more safety in the sober sort of affection which is all they can give each other now, than in a more passionate flame ; and at any rate she is a woman to be proud of so far as appearance and manner go. It will gratify his father to hear his son's wife described. Yes, the thing shall be done, and the sooner the better. All he wants is to have as little sentimentality as possible, and no uncertainty. There is a letter from his father lying on the table awaiting him, and as he reads it an idea comes into his mind which will further both these

desires, and he determines to carry it out.

It is striking twelve, and a rough equinoctial wind is rattling at the hotel windows, and making the fireless grate, with its hideous cut-paper ornaments, look chill and dreary; but before he goes to bed he sits down and writes a brief letter to Vivian, asking her in so many words to be his wife, and telling her that by the fact of her acceptance he will take her former innocence for granted. "I will not grieve you by repeating the questions I asked you to-day," he writes, "I do not want to be ungenerous to the living or the dead; but as I could neither love nor honour a woman who had been wilfully untrue to me in the past, so I am sure I could not make her love me, or make her happy. If you say that you will marry me now I shall believe that you love me,



and that you were as much wronged as I in that past, which we will spend the rest of our lives in forgetting. Only, Vivian, remember one thing—I have changed since those old days, and for the worse, as you may have seen. If, because of that, you are afraid to risk your happiness with me, do not let the thought of anything I may have suffered before lead you to be good to me at your own expense. In marriage both must be happy or neither. If you come to me I will do all a man can to make you so; and now think over it before you reply. I am going North for a few days on this mining business of my father's. If I do not have your answer till my return I will not complain: and—I will trust you."

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## CHAPTER II.

### PAVING THE WAY.

BACK at Stanefell Farm again, where the corn is being gathered in, and the apples are growing redder and redder day by day, and blackberries are falling into little tin pots and pails, from every hedge, at the hands of the sturdy, sunburnt, peasant children, where the guelder rose spreads out her clusters of ruby-coloured berries above the yellowing maple leaves, and the graceful silver weed by the wayside has turned to an orange plume fit for some fairy knight, and the evening air

has a crisp feeling in it telling of autumn frosts not very many weeks hence.

It is evening now—a golden evening after a glorious day—and Farmer Brown and his wife are sitting side by side in the porch, enjoying the sunset cool, and the rest which follows pleasantly after a heavy six o'clock supper. Not one of those picturesque trellis-work porches, wreathed with honeysuckle or jasmine, that one sees in plenty in the southern counties, but one deep and solid—built of rough grey stone, and roofed with slate—like all the rest of the rough, solid, ugly old house, and only embellished by a dense mat of ivy on one side, which stretches up so as nearly to cover the front of the house, and has to be cut away round the windows, so as to admit light and air.

In front is a narrow strip of garden, gay

with yellow wallflowers, fragrant mignonette, and homely old-fashioned sweet-william, white and pink and crimson, with such other common hardy flowers as generally grow in cottage gardens ; and beyond it is a broad cornfield, in which the red-gold sheaves are still standing, and which slopes away down the incline of the hill on which the house stands.

There are not many trees in sight ; Stanefell Farm, as the name implies, being more productive of stone and rock than spreading verdure or rich vegetation ; neither is the surrounding country in any way remarkable for natural beauty ; but just now, in the cool of the evening, with the bees humming round their big russet hives under the sweetbriar hedge, with the laughter of children ringing merrily from the paddock in the rear, and the last rays of the sun glittering on the

sheaves of bearded corn till they turn to tufts of fiery gold against the cool, pale blue of the autumnal sky, the whole scene presents a picture of quiet, rural comfort and harmony which the farmer and his wife might not care to exchange for the purple vineyards of a Florentine landscape or the giant majesty of the Niagarean falls. Mrs. Brown's eyes are fixed, however, on two figures slowly meandering along one side of the cornfield; their dark heads sharply silhouetted, and a frown is gathering slowly on her brow, the brow of a large woman whose comeliness has coarsened with age, as pretty Dolly's will do, too, some day, but whose voice has still that softly musical "coo" in it which is common to almost all Northumbrian women.

"Father dear," she says gently, after awhile, during which the frown has deepened, "rouse up a bit will 'ee. There's something

on my mind I'll ha' been wanting to say to you this long while."

"Say it noo then, my woman," answers the farmer. "What will it be? Naething wrong wi' the farm, I hope, that I've no been tauld about?" And the mild, worn face is lifted suddenly to its better half with that shrinking, anxious look, peculiar to those who have heard of things "going wrong" so often that they are always on the alert to hear it again; a look so suggestive of utter helplessness to meet whatever may be amiss that it goes like a stab to the heart of the staunch, brave wife who has kept both ends firmly together through all the years of ups and downs they have passed at one another's side.

"Nay, nay," she says soothingly, and putting down her knitting-needles that she

may lay one broad hand on his knee. "Dinna ye trouble aboot the fairm. I'm wishing every day ye would leave it a' to Tom. The lad has a gude head on his shoulders; an' though the place is a bit big for him now, that's easily mended, for ye'll no be forgetting Mr. Gleddall has made a downright offer for the lang meadow and the bit waste land beyond, an' that'll be a gude roun' sum for us an' take a hantle o' care off my heid. Why, even wi'out Phil, Tom culd guide the rest as lichtly as no, an' you just sit easy in your arm-chair an' tak tent o' yourseef as I'd be fain to see you for the rest o' your days. Nay, man, if a' on the fairm went as well as a' wi' the fairm is doing this summer I'd say thank the Lord an' be glad."

"An' what's wrong then?" the farmer asks with some testiness; very little, for

Berrie's "spirit" has not come to her from her father, but which has been evoked by the thought that his wife is inclined to look upon him as superannuated and only fit to give up the reins to Tom; a necessity against which he has been making a stand for some months. "What's amiss wi' you, Janet, woman?"

"Naught wi' me. 'Tis the children. I'm fearing there's a sair tangle amang them the noo', an' I dinna ken what we'll be doing to set it right. Haven't ye noticed aught between Phil an' Dolly, John?"

"Nay. What would I notice? Has the lad taken to teasing her again? But she's no such a bairn noo that she canna take her own part, and he ought to be o'ermuch tuik up wi' t'other lassie now he's gotten her back again to be girding at Dolly as he used to do."



“ Ah man, I wish it were girding, but it’s no that. ’Tis the other thing richt awa’. The lad’s ower pleasant an’ douce wi’ her by half, an’ Berrie is aye left oot i’ the cauld, an’ the worst o’ it is that I canna mend things. I’ll ha’ talkit to Dolly times and again; but the lassie is that wilful there’s no hauding her, an’ she just gets up a bit pout, an’ says ’tis hard that Phil, who’s aye been like her own brother, must leave off being so because Berrie’s come hame; an’ then she tells Phil, and to-day—— Now, luik there, John man, there they go across the cornfield yonder, as thick as two birdies in mating time, and only to-day——”

“ What happened to-day?” the farmer asks sharply. Both girls are his children and children dearly loved. Not even to himself would he own that he makes a shade of difference between them; yet it is

true that for Berrie, his "ladye wife's" child, the girlish relic of that early marriage which assuredly never brought him much of other good, he has a secret, special tenderness, setting her apart, as it were, in an upper chamber of his heart; and regarding himself as accountable to her dead mother for her proper care and bringing up. It is only this latter feeling indeed which has reconciled him to parting with her during her long sojourn with her grandmother, for, as he has often told himself with a kind of simple, unselfish pride: "If the auld woman is minded to make a fine lady o' my little lass, why 'tis the bairn's richt so to be, an' what her puir mother would ha' wished to see her." Nay, the very fact that the second Mrs. Brown has always entered into this feeling with ungrudging warmth and heartiness,

showing equal affection to her stepdaught e  
as to her own fairer and ruddier children,  
and being always ready to take the former's  
part in any case of injustice to her, has been  
one of the strongest links binding her to  
the husband to whom, in the matter of real  
value, her little finger is worth more than  
his first wife and all she ever brought him  
put together. On the present occasion it is  
with honest annoyance that she directs her  
husband's attention to the couple in the  
field, exclaiming, in the raised tones of  
healthy womanly indignation: "What hap-  
pened to-day? Why I tuik Phil there a'  
by himself an' tould him to his face that if  
he went on as he did I should believe he  
was fonder o' Dolly than her sister, an' that  
he was giving Berrie a richt to think the  
same."

"Eh, and what did the lad say, confound

him?" asks the old farmer, roused enough now to sit upright angrily and throw the week-old *Newcastle Courier* on one side.

"Naething at a' at first, but just red-dened up to his eyes, and when I said to him: 'Phil, you're never going to play fause wi' your motherless cousin,' answered me quite sharp: 'I'm no going to play fause wi' nobody, but boys an' men see differently a' the world ower, an' ye canna blame me if your own daughter has grown up bonnier an' better than—other people's. 'Tis I who am to be pitied, not Berrie, if it comes to that, for I dinna believe she's a lass to care much for any man save her father, she's that matter o' fact an' auld-maidish.'"

"Said I to Phil, an' richt angeret I was, 'You mean, lad, that Berrie's a gude daughter, an' has too much respec' for hersel'

to fule your vanity as other girls do; an' mark me,' said I, 'if you say one word o' this haverin<sup>\*</sup> to my lassie I'll never forgive you; an' to prevent it I'll just sen' her away the morn coming to stay wi' her aunt at Newcassel till you've come back to yoursel'."

"'Maybe you'd better,' said he coolly, 'but 'tis rather hard on her, for I'm thinking that will be a long while, an' 'tis no fault o' hers.' Wi' that out he went an' left me, an' noo, John, see, there they go the two o' them for a' the world as if I'd ne'er spoken to either. What will we be doing about it, man?"

Someone has come from the kitchen, which is at the other end of the wide entry into which the porch opens, at

\* Nonsense.

the commencement of Mrs. Brown's story. Someone who has been making a jug of whey for an ailing child, and who still wears a big holland bib and apron over her neat stuff gown as she draws near, meaning to indulge in a little chat with her elders before taking the jug upstairs, and happily ignorant (thanks to the imprudent loudness of her stepmother's tones) of there being anything private in the subject-matter of their discourse. It is only her own name coming in suddenly just when she was within a yard of the speaker which startles her into abrupt comprehension of the full meaning of the conversation which, till then, has fallen idly on her ears, and for a moment, nay, a whole minute she stands there struck dumb and motionless as it were by the shock of this confirmation of her worst

suspicious till, recalled to her scattered senses and the consciousness that she is overhearing what was never meant for her by the sudden cessation of Mrs. Brown's voice, she turns and flies away, never pausing till she is in her own room and down on her knees by the casement with cheeks redder than any poppy, and two hot, trembling hands pressed over her ears as if to shut out the humiliating words which are still ringing in them.

The sun has gone down behind the sheaves of golden corn. The sky has taken a tinge of pure, transparent green, crossed by a single amber streak just edged with fire on the lower side above the horizon. The cows are lowing from the shed whither they have been taken for their evening's milking. Ernie, for whom the whey was destined,

he having returned from school that day so feverish and headachy as to positively betake himself to bed of his own accord after supper, calls loudly from the adjoining attic, "Berrie! Berrie! Is that you? Do come here," but for once Berrie pays no heed. She does not even hear him. Her eyes are fixed on the field-path where, to and fro, to and fro, the two familiar figures still pace beneath the twilight sky, and the girl's full red lips quiver as she murmurs:

"And I would have been true to him! I would, I was. I thought I should have hurt him otherwise, and been as base as that other woman. And yet all the while—all the while—— Oh, if I had only known then, I might have been so much happier."

"Berrie!" Ernie's voice cries again,



"Berrie, or Dolly, which is it? Do come to me," and this time Berrie hears and straightens herself up, a rather bitter little smile on her ripe mouth.

"Of course it is Berrie," she says, but not so that the boy can hear, as she goes to him: "it is always Berrie when there is anything to do. Dolly has better occupation elsewhere."

That night, however, when all the household is abed, and silence has reigned for some time where the two elder girls sleep, Barberry's voice sounds cheerfully from her little white couch in the corner under the eaves:

"I say, Dolly dear, are you awake?"

No answer.

"Dolly child, you're not asleep, are you?"

"Don't see how I can be if you wake

me like that," Dolly answers then very crossly, yet not exactly in the tone of a person just aroused. In truth, the beauty, who has been unwontedly silent and depressed-looking all the evening, has not yet dropped into her first slumber, a fact which Berrie has guessed from the restless movements which have been disturbing her sister's bed ever since she laid down. Nevertheless, she answers good-humouredly, almost in a coaxing tone :

"I didn't mean to wake you, but I do want to talk to you about something if you're not very sleepy ; are you ?"

Were there light enough in the room, which there is not, Berrie might have seen her sister lift her head suddenly with a movement as though her nerves were not steady, and the innocent sounding sentence

startles her, but she only answers in the same sulky tone as before :

“What about? Can’t it wait till to-morrow?”

“No; for I never can get five minutes in the daytime for a talk with anyone, unless I want the whole household to assist at it,” Berrie says briskly. “Don’t be cross, Dolly, there’s a good girl now, for I’m in a fix, that’s the fact of it, an awful fix, and I want you to help me out of it.”

“I? How? I don’t understand.” The other voice is changed now, its sulky tone replaced by one of curiosity with a substratum of uneasiness, and Berrie raises herself on her elbow, so as to be heard more easily, thereby bringing herself into such faint light from the window as just touches the frills about the throat of her

nightdress, and the round edge of her cheek.

“I’ll tell you—— You will help me, won’t you, Doll? I know you’ve thought me rather cross lately, but the fact is, it’s this very matter has been bothering me, and I always get cross when I’m bothered. Now do tell me, don’t you think people are sometimes right to break off an engagement?”

“To break off—— What engagement?” Dolly asks nervously enough now and with crimsoning cheeks. She too is sitting upright at present, her knees drawn up against her dimpled chin, and her hot hands clasping them. Berrie laughs out but rather forcedly :

“Whose? Well, just now, mine and Phil’s, Dolly; it’s no use going on with it. We arn’t a bit suited to one another,

and any impartial person would say so who saw us. Perhaps we were once. I'm sure I don't know, but if so one of us must have changed very much, for almost as soon as I saw him at Grange, I felt that it was a mistake, and every day since I've gone on feeling it more. Now, don't you think so yourself?"

"I—I don't know," Dolly stammers. Taken by surprise in this way, she is at a loss how to answer a question so embarrassing. She can just catch a glimpse too of that dimly white shoulder in the dark corner, and fancies that her sister's eyes must be seeing her, and her confusion. It is only a sense of duty which forces her to add rather hesitatingly :

"I think—I daresay it is only that you have been away so long. You oughtn't to think of such things. He hasn't

changed, I'm sure, and by-and-by, when you've got back again to be more like him——"

"But I don't want to be like him," Berrie puts in impetuously, her eager incisive manner contrasting strangely with her sister's timidity and hesitation. "I should hate to be. What I should like, if I am to marry him, would be for him to be different."

"Berrie! but that's not just." Dolly's tone is a little bolder, and more like its natural one now. "Why, he's older than you, four or five years, and then he's a man! It wouldn't be reasonable to expect him to change to suit you. Besides, what could you want to alter in Phil? Why, I'm sure no one else ever finds fault with him."

"What could I want to alter? Oh, lots

of things," says Berrie, lightly. "The way he does his hair, and cuts his nails, and the colour of his neckties. If there's one thing I hate it's lilac-satin neckties, with little blue horse-shoes spotted about them, and—— But there! What's the use of talking? You know he hates just as many things in me. He can't bear to see me reading a book, and he doesn't care a bit about any of my friends, and I believe if I had Edla von Freilo in the house, he wouldn't be civil to her! He's not very civil to me, for that matter."

"Why, Berrie," Dolly remonstrates, "I'm sure he means to be. It's only that you don't understand his chaffing way, and then you're so prim and stand off. It isn't natural he'd like that, when most girls here are so different. They never find anything amiss with him, and I'm

sure—yes, I'm nearly sure he'd be ever so much more affectionate with you, if you were only a bit warmer with him."

"But I shouldn't like him to be more affectionate," cries Berrie, with a wholly involuntary shiver of repulsion. "That's just it. If he were to be, I should—I really think I should want to throw something at him, or run away. And that's why I'm sure we oughtn't to get married. I don't so much mind it now while we aren't much together, and have other people with us, and I suppose that is proof that I don't love him; for, Dolly, if I were going to marry anyone I was in love with, I should like to be a great deal with him, and I should want him to be ever so much more affectionate and respectful to me than Phil is, or ever was. Yes, and to wait on



me, and care for me, and be—oh! as different from Phil as ever he could be.”

“Why! Berrie?” Dolly Brown stammers, too utterly taken aback by her sister’s unexpected outburst and rapid speech for more. Indeed, that anyone can hold Phil, “Cousin Phil,” in light estimation, or think him capable of improvement, is in itself such a *bouleversement* of all her own ideas, that she could hardly grasp it. Berrie does not give her much time for doing so.

“There now, you know all about it,” she says more quietly, “and what I want to ask you is, don’t you think, as things are, that we ought to break it off, or rather that I ought; for I suppose men don’t like to do so, eh? It’s not the thing.”

“No indeed; and I’m sure Phil wouldn’t anyhow, he’s much——too good,” Dolly exclaims with an unconscious warmth, which

makes proud little Berrie's upper lip curl ever so slightly. She answers quite calmly, however :

"Yes, that's just what I say. He won't; so, unless I do, we shall both be made miserable for life. For we should be miserable. Don't you think so yourself? Dolly, if you don't say something—and mind you're to speak the solemn truth—I'll never speak to you again."

"I think—I don't think—— How can I tell!" stammers poor Dolly in great perturbation, "I can't see why marrying Phil should make you miserable; that is, if you could get to like him and his ways. I don't know why you can't."

"Nor I either; but I can't, any more than he can like me and my ways. There's one comfort, however, I think if we were both back as we were long ago, cousins and

nothing more, we should get on much better."

"Do you really, Berrie?"

"Yes, I'm sure of it. Indeed I could be quite fond of him then, while now—— So that's how I want to settle it, Doll. Do you think he will agree? I shouldn't like him to quarrel with me, it would grieve father so."

"Oh, he wouldn't do that, I'm sure."

Dolly answers with an innocent eagerness, which brings the bright eyes on her somewhat sharply.

"Are you? I am glad," says Berrie quietly, "for I do like him as a cousin; and I should hate not to be friends with him, especially when he is going away so soon to his new farm. By-the-way, Dolly, you'll not be able to come and see me there as we used to plan. Never mind! I shouldn't

wonder if he married someone else quite soon ; and then we can both go and see his wife. That will be great fun."

"But would you like it, Berrie—for him to marry someone else?" Dolly asks with a tremble at the heart. Phil has been so far honest that he has never said anything outright to her ; but she knows full well, that he, too, has not been happy in his shackles ; and that if he were free to choose again, he might—— The consciousness of whom he might choose, and of the tacit disloyalty to her sister which lies in it, dyes her cheeks rosy red in the darkness ; but Berrie's answer is most reassuring.

"Like it ! Why, of all things ; I should feel then that there could not have been any wrong in breaking it off ; while if he stayed single—— Well, Dolly, I'm glad you agree with me on the whole ; for to-

morrow I think I shall just write Phil a little letter, and tell him that I'm sure we are much better apart; and if he says anything to you about it, be sure you take my side and tell him just how I feel. Good-night now. I won't keep you awake any longer."

"Good-night—— But oh! Berrie, I didn't agree. I—I wish you wouldn't," falters Dolly, and then buries her head under the clothes to smother a sob. There is no answer, however, and for a minute or two both might be asleep, the room is so quiet. Then there is a sudden rustle, and the younger girl feels a warm arm round her shoulder, and a rough, curly head, brushing against hers.

"Good-night, you poor tired Dolly," says Berrie, and kisses her with a little tremble on her lips. "You've been very good to

listen for so long, and—and I shan't be cross any more, now I've had it out. You'll see!"

She is back in bed the next moment, and the after silence is not again broken; only while the younger sister lies wide awake, frightened, agitated, and excited, half happy, and half remorseful, wondering honestly at Berrie's strange heartlessness where Phil is concerned; and yet blushing guiltily at the newly-discovered knowledge of how grateful this heartlessness is to herself; Berrie crushes her pale little face into the pillow, and drawing the bedclothes tightly around her, as though they were her mother's arms, cries herself silently to sleep with a little flood of half sad, half bitter tears, the root of which she has neither heart nor energy to seek for.

## CHAPTER III.

### BROKEN OFF.

BREAKFAST at Stanefell is generally a cheerful, conversational, and, to speak truth, rather noisy meal; Farmer Brown and the two young men discussing the coming work for the day. Berrie, like Werther's Charlotte, cutting bread-and-butter for the young ones, seeing that Bubbles does not spill all her milk-porridge over the cloth, and exchanging fragmentary bits of household talk with her stepmother; Dolly throwing in a word now and then when the conversation turns on clothes or the neighbours, and keeping up a

kind of teasing, coquettish fight with Philip ; the twins chattering like magpies, and prolonging their meal to the last possible instant, so as not to have to go to school sooner than may be helped ; Ralph, the great house-dog, stalking solemnly in at the ever open door, and going the round of the table for scraps and caresses ; birds chirping among the leaves, and fowls clucking on the gravel outside ; Louie's black kitten spitting viciously at Ralph from the back of the farmer's tall-backed oaken chair ; over and above all, Dolly's canary singing in a jubilant and ear-piercing manner, enough to deafen any but a family thoroughly healthy and hardened against noises of all descriptions.

These are a few of the concomitants which usually go to making up the early morning meal at Stanefell Farm, and to rendering it a very cheerful and pleasant one ; but to-



day, the day following that conversation recorded in the last chapter, there is a decided cloud overhanging the breakfast-table, and directly overshadowing a sufficient number of the party to affect the whole. Even Mrs. Brown, generally the centre of harmony and good temper, has an anxious, pre-occupied look, and is so sharp in her manner both to Philip and her eldest daughter, that the former, who has sat down to breakfast looking very grim and moody becomes perceptibly more so, while Dolly, the gayest of the party on other days, never opens her lips once and hardly lifts her eyes, but keeps her pretty face bent over her plate as if trying to avoid both Philip's questioning looks and her mother's severe glance by an affectation of being absorbed in her meal; although if anyone were to take the trouble to notice

they might see that she is eating nothing, and that her round, fair cheeks are flushed to an almost feverish crimson, which deepens every time she is looked at. Berrie, on the other hand, is pale, so pale that her bright penetrating eyes look keener and darker than ever; but there is a resolute, almost triumphant expression about her mouth, and she eats her breakfast silently, and attends to the duties of the table in a business-like, energetic fashion as if she had work on hand which did not allow of time being wasted over it. Even the children contribute no cheerfulness to the meal; for Ernie is still complaining of sickness and "pains" as a reason for not going to school, while his fellow-twin, who always regulates her feelings by his, teases her mother for a similar indulgence for herself, and, not getting it, is disagree-

able to Bubbles, causing that unoffending young lady to upset her basin of porridge bodily, and to be removed from the table in dire tears and disgrace.

Breakfast comes to an end at last, however, as all things do in this world. Phil rather hastening this one by announcing that he must see to his horse being got ready, as he is going to ride over to Chollerford to inspect the farm which he is about to purchase. He looks pointedly at Dolly as he makes the observation; and, in the ordinary course of events, Dolly would either jump up and follow him openly, to give Black Bob a parting feed of apples, or his master some commission in the village of Chollerford, or would have made some little coquettish pretence of having business in the back regions, which would oblige her to find herself in the stable-yard within the

next five minutes. To-day, however, she does not even look at him when he speaks, but turns away her head, and astonishes her mother by a stammering suggestion that she shall help her with sorting the family linen for the wash, an unromantic piece of work which ever since her sister's return has fallen to the latter's share; while Berrie, who has grown perceptibly paler during Philip's speech, pushes her chair back from the table, and rising, follows him out into the entry.

He is marching away to the stables sulkily enough, having overheard Dolly's unwontedly dutiful offer, and guessing that for some reason or another that capricious little damsel doesn't mean to act as his lordship's squire this morning. Perhaps, too, his conscience suggests as a reason one or two words which he suffered to escape him

yesterday evening, words which assuredly Berrie's betrothed had no right to say to Berrie's sister ; and therefore when he turns his head quickly at the sound of a light step behind him, he is proportionately disappointed at finding that it is not Dolly who has changed her mind, but his betrothed herself who is following him.

"Did you call me?" he asks rather awkwardly, being conscious of the change in his face ; and Berrie, whose quick eyes have seen it too, smiles a little bitterly as she answers :

"No, but I was coming after you. I wanted to ask you to do something for me at Chollerford. You will be a good time going over the farm, I suppose?"

"Half the day, I daresay. Rigg's lawyer is to meet me there in the afternoon, and I want to have seen the place inside and

out first. One doesn't buy a pig in a poke ; and I shall get some dinner at the inn there, so you needn't expect me till you see me. What is it you want ?”

For a minute Berrie hesitates. She is quick-tempered by nature, and her cousin's short, almost sullen manner, makes her lips burn to answer, “Nothing much, save to be free of you, Philip ;” but there are other people to be considered besides herself, and the last thing she wishes is to quarrel with Philip. For Dolly's sake alone that must not be ; and besides, ever since one thought which came to her last night, she has not been so perfectly conscious of her own past rectitude as to want to cast stones at her faithless lover, therefore she chokes down the feeling of irritation, and answers him cheerfully :

“What do I want ? Oh, two or three

things; but I've written them down, so you needn't trouble to remember them. Here! You can read them when you've got time."

"Why not now? And what's the gude o' writing them? One would think I'd no more heid for remembering things than a girl," Philip says more crossly yet. Decidedly fate is inclining him to show himself in his worst colours this morning; but Berrie is not to be put out. It will be so soon over now. She even smiles as she answers:

"Nay, sir, but women's wants take long telling, and you mightn't have had time to listen. See, your horse is ready now. Poor Bob! Nice old Bob. Good fellow."

She has slipped past him into the yard to end the discussion, and is patting Phil's horse and stroking his glossy neck with such

a nervous hand as might be imprudent if it were on the reins. Her cousin follows her hastily, cramming the envelope she has given him into his waistcoat-pocket, and shouting an order to the stable-boy in the distance. He has made up his mind now that Dolly is purposely keeping out of his way; and, becoming very indignant with her, relents towards Berrie, and even stoops down from the saddle as soon as he is mounted to give her a sounding kiss, adding in a more affectionate tone than he has used before :

“Don’t luik grave, lassie. I’ll not be forgetting your commissions; though what you’ll be wanting at Chollerford, and Tom going over to Hexham yesterday, I can’t guess.”

“Nothing you cannot do for me if you will, at any rate,” Berrie answers smiling.



She has grown very pale again, almost white; but she does not shrink from his kiss. She even puts up her lips and kisses him herself as she has not done for some little time.

“Good-bye, Phil dear,” she says quite tenderly. “Good-bye. Mind you forgive me, even if I do trouble you;” and then, as he rides away out of the stone-flagged yard, she stands looking after him, and shading her eyes from the sunlight with her hand till the last glimpse of horse and rider are out of sight.

She has sent away her other lover now: sent him away for good, like the last, though he does not know it yet; and perhaps, as she lingers where he left her with that careless farewell kiss upon her brow, a vision of the solitary life to which she has voluntarily doomed herself rises before her

eyes and makes the sunny landscape in front of them grow dim and dazzled for a moment with a rush of unshed tears.

“But we couldn’t have been happy if we had kept it on,” she murmurs to herself, dashing away the drops with a determined hand, “and Dolly will be, and will make him so. In her eyes he is perfection, and perhaps he ought to have been so in mine ; though for her sake I can’t be sorry that he isn’t. Poor little Doll ! I have been cross to her of late ; and I don’t believe that she ever really thought of taking my place till last night. She couldn’t help his liking her best. I should think most men would, and I’m sure she looks frightened and sorry enough this morning. Now all that I’ve got to do is to take care that her name doesn’t get mixed up in it in any way, and for that the first thing is to get hold

of the mother. She will always stand up for me, dear soul, because I'm not her own daughter, and Doll may suffer for it. Oh, dear ! I wish to-day was over."

Poor Berrie ! she has cause to repeat that wish very often before it is carried out. It is a hard day to get through in every sense of the word ; for though her father is malleable enough, and not difficult to persuade that nothing can be very wrong which ends in leaving his "own wee lass" at home with him, Mrs. Brown is by no means so ductile; and is herself so impervious to all Berrie's arguments that the latter begins to fear that, unless Phil is on her side, she will not be allowed to have her way after all.

"You who have altered ! An' if so, how is it ye'll no have foun' it out while you were at your gran'mother's, lassie ?" the

good woman says sceptically. "Eh, dinna tell me. Ye keptit true an' loving to him a' that time, an' ye'd never alter now wi'out he'd done something to make ye, or that you fancy——" and when Berrie, dreading what may be coming, interrupts her with eager asseverations that it is no fancy, that the change is in her own mind and has been coming on ever since her return home, her stepmother only laughs.

"Well, then, be a gude lassie an' change your mind again. Sure, you're both young enough, tho' one 'ould think to hear ye talk ye were auld folks wi' dead fixed habits an' opeenions that couldna' be shaken if ye tried. Noo, my dearie, just be frank wi' me. Isna' it the truth that ye think Phil may ha' been a bit fickle or——"

"Mother!" Berrie's tone is almost

savage. "Be still. Why won't you believe me? I—don't—think," speaking very distinctly, "that Phil is a bit more fickle than I, poor fellow! and I'm sure I wouldn't have thrown him over for anyone else in the world. No, indeed, I wish he were. The pleasantest thing I could hear this minute would be that he was going to marry someone else. At present, I don't even know what he'll say; and that's why I want you on my side, not his. You used to like me best."

And so Berrie gets the last word; for what can Mrs. Brown say after such a vehement declaration, followed by its coaxing appeal. Besides, after all, it may be true. Berrie's own coldness may have blinded her to Philip's flirtation with her sister, if it has not induced it; and as for Dolly, would any mother with a mother's

heart not be glad of an excuse for exonerating her own child from blame? She tells Berrie indeed that she doesn't believe Phil will let her go, and that she won't ever think anything of him again if he does. But the activity of her opposition is over; and her stepdaughter sees it, and breathes more freely. So far she is successful, and Dolly safe.

It is not till next day, however, that the principal person to be consulted, Mr. Philip Souter himself, allows his decision to be known. In vain Berrie watches for his return in the evening in a small fever of suspense. In vain Dolly goes to the trouble of having a bad headache (not altogether feigned) in order that she may keep in her own room and out of his way when he comes. Both sisters have their expectation for nothing, as Phil

does not return to the farm at all that night ; and Louie, who is at that unpleasant age of small girlhood which always finds out what it is not meant to know, makes her elders very angry by expressing it as her opinion that poor Phil has drowned himself in the Tyne at Chollerford, because Berrie isn't going to marry him after all, or live at the Bridge Farm." Only at night, Dolly, who has rather avoided her stepsister all day, and has received her mother's suggestion of the visit to Newcastle with a meekness and even readiness to go, which has gone far towards mollifying Mrs. Brown's tender heart :—at night, Dolly finds courage to say, with a heartiness which is thoroughly sincere :

"Berrie, dear, don't be angry ; but I do think you've been hasty ; and if Phil tells you so—if he makes you hold to your word,

. . .

don't stand out against him, please don't. He loves you better than you think. I'm sure he does."

"He loves me as much as I love him, I hope," says Berrie calmly; "but I shall stand out against his holding me for all that. Don't say any more about it, Dolly; I only wish he'd come home and have it over."

And early enough next morning her wish is granted; for when she goes out into the poultry-yard after breakfast to feed the chickens, the first person she sees there is Philip leaning against the wall of the barn almost as if he were waiting for her. For one moment Berrie's courage fails her. Suppose he should mean to hold her to her word! The idea, now that she has gone so far, seems too terrible; and her face flushes and her heart beats high



against it. She almost turns to fly in the dread of the moment; but before the cowardly impulse can be carried into execution, Phil has stepped forward and called to her. There can be no idea of retreat after that.

"Look here," he says, as she comes towards him red as any poppy and very timidly; and taking her letter out of his pocket, he holds it up to her. "What did you mean by giving me this? You're not in earnest, you know."

"Indeed, Phil, I am. I mean it; I wouldn't have written it otherwise," the girl stammers, more unnerved by the coolness of his voice and manner than she had expected to be, yet trying to strengthen herself against opposition.

"You want to get rid of me then, to go back from your engagement?"

he asks in the same hard voice, rather more raised.

“I think it will be better. I am very sorry ; but I’m sure we should not be happy. Pray don’t be angry with me, Phil, dear. I don’t blame you. It is my doing.”

“If it’s done at all, it will be your doing, of course. That’s what I want to say. You can do as you like. I don’t want to force any girl to marry me, I’m not so poor-spirited as a’ that ; or to make her unhappy either. But don’t go to say afterwards that ’twas I broke wi’ you. I’m not unhappy, an’ I’ve just signed the agreement for yon farm ; so if you like to take me, an’ it wi’ me, now as was agreed, here I am. A man can’t say fairer.”

“But I don’t want to take you—or the farm either. I told you so.”

Berrie is driven almost to discourtesy, being too much taken aback by this unexpected mode of meeting her to find any softer phrases.

"Then we may as well give the thing up," her lover answers coolly. "Of course if you've decided it's no use my saying anything. You say we don't suit one another, an' you ought to know best. I never said you didn't suit me."

"I know you didn't, Phil."

"Only you must make up your mind this time for good. If you were to change it again——"

"I shall not do that, Phil. You needn't be afraid."

"Very well. That's all I wanted to say; only I'm sorry we couldn't hit it off better. The fact is, uncle should never ha' let you

go to that nonsensical, high-falutin', foreign school——”

“Never mind my schools now. It's too late to dispute about them,” Berrie says quickly. “Shake hands, Phil, that we may feel that we are friends, and let me go. It has been a mistake all through ; but I made it. It was my fault.” And with that she escapes. Who could ever have guessed that her freedom would be so easy to obtain ? If it were not a little mortifying, the absurdity of the scene would almost make her laugh. Indeed, when she is quite by herself, she does laugh : laughs till the tears are hanging on her eyelashes and each little gurgle of merriment comes on the back of a sob, so that an onlooker might almost have fancied there was something hysterical in her mirth. To have waited so long, and

gone through so much unhappiness, so many doubts, and hesitations, and scruples—for what? Only to find that there had been no need for anything of the sort, but that her lover was so ready to meet her half-way in severing the connection between them as hardly to care to know her reason for such a decision or to waste five minutes of an autumn morning in discussing them, is in good truth rather ridiculous, not to say humiliating; and as Berrie is neither old enough, nor sufficiently a woman of the world, for the idea to occur to her that Phil's off-hand manner may have been in part assumed, her pride has not even the healing salve of knowing that she has a fellow sufferer in the awkwardness of the situation which she has created for herself.

“He must have been desperately anxious to get rid of me,” the girl says to herself

with a very little mouth of disgust. "And to think of how anxious I was to spare his feelings and Dolly's name, and of mother's grave face and remonstrances! She and I might have spared ourselves a good deal of trouble instead, and I hope she won't send poor Dolly away to her aunt's, though for that matter Phil is quite capable of proposing to her, and settling the day and all minor particulars while she's packing her trunk. Why didn't Captain Comyns take things as coolly, and be as easy to console!" and then as a vision of that lover, and of his pained, pleading eyes, and the worn lines in his face rises before her, the girl thrusts the vision away with a nervous shiver, which betrays how hard it was to steel herself against it before, and drawing a long breath, which is nigh akin to a sigh, murmurs:

“Well, he was right in one thing. He said I might see the announcement of his marriage before my own, and I daresay I shall, for there’ll be no marriage of mine now to announce. Oh, dear! I hope no one will ever, ever make love to me again. I don’t think it’s at all likely, but if they should, I shall tell them in the beginning to leave off, for——”

“Who’s that riding out of the yard?”

It is Phil; and when Berrie goes downstairs she finds that he has departed “on business,” which may keep him away for a day or two. It is a great comfort to her; for to sit opposite to him at table, with the consciousness that they are no longer engaged to one another, and that everyone round is aware of the fact, and is taking observations of them to see how they behave under the circumstances, would be both

awkward and unpleasant; while now she can tell her stepmother briefly that all is over, and go about her work with a lighter heart than usual for the sense of her freedom. It is a subject of gratulation that there is always too much to do at the farm for sentiment to be long indulged in by anyone; and even Mrs. Brown's kindly anxiety for her stepdaughter's happiness is soon dissipated by the graver one of Ernie's illness. The child continues to get worse, complaining of constant sickness and pains in his limbs, symptoms which refuse to yield to home remedies; and on the third day the mother gets so uneasy as to ask Berrie to take the pony-cart and drive in to Hexham to see the doctor about him.

"You can tell him just what the child feels better than a letter," the mother says anxiously; "and there's a lot of stores



wanting, and stuff for your and Dolly's autumn gowns. I'll be glad and grateful if you'll go for me, Berrie. I dinna like to leave the bairn myself."

## CHAPTER IV.

### IN HEXHAM ABBEY.

It is one of the finest and brightest of mornings, such mornings as late September gives us not unfrequently, when Berrie sets out for the neighbouring town of Hexham, driving Tubs the pony in a somewhat shabby little vehicle familiarly known as the cart, though elevated on occasions of dignity into the "gig." To Barberry, however, the name matters little. The cart has a comfortable, cushioned seat and is low, and therefore easy to get in and out of. Tubs, though not an aristocratic pony,

being somewhat thick of leg and stumpy of neck, is what Josh calls a "oner to go," when he's neither hungry, cross, nor tired, and on the present occasion, being refreshed by a night's rest and a good feed of corn, is none of the three. The air is fresh, and crisp, and pure, the sky a flawless turquoise, swept by long wind-tossed clouds like white feathers, the day full of song and breeze and warm mellow sunlight; and Barberry somehow feels as though she were a flower pent for a long while back in some dark room, and suddenly released to welcome the brightness around with a joyous expansion of her own petals.

True, there are always some troubles to damp everyone's spirits; and Berrie is by no means without hers. Her father is evidently a man failing in mind and body. Josh's last school bill is still unpaid; she

herself has just consecrated herself to old-maidhood by handing over a not unwilling lover to her younger sister ; and last and most present, Ernie is looking ill enough as he leans his heavy head against his mother's shoulder to warrant the latter's anxious look and repeated injunctions to Berrie to make the doctor come over at once if she can ; but with all this there is a sunshine in the girl's heart, a spring and lightening of spirit, which she has not felt for a long while, and which makes snatches of old Border rhymes ripple over her lips, as she drives along the broad, sunny high-road which leads from Wall to Hexham over the Northumbrian highlands.

Old North-country people will tell you that this frame of mind in a person, this buoyant gladness, when there is nothing specially to be glad for, is "fey,"

and bid you beware of it as a sure portent of some coming evil ; but if Berrie has ever heard of the old superstition it does not disturb her mind now, and she even takes a saucy, fantastic pleasure in trying to recall Phil's taste in the matter of feminine dress, as a guide towards choosing that gown for Dolly which is one of the commissions on her list.

It is market-day in the quaint, old-fashioned, compact county town whither Berrie is bound, and which, built as it is on the summit of a low hill surrounded by much loftier ones, and with its grand old Abbey Church, standing high above all the surrounding roofs, in the centre of it, looks like a toy-town out of a box, or one of those quaint mediæval cities (but that it lacks the wall which ought to be round it), that we see in certain ancient German

engravings. And, indeed, Hexham is no new-fangled, modern, go-ahead town, but a staid, old-world place, whose very stones are of a good conservatively feudal turn of mind, insomuch that the narrow streets, instead of zig-zagging about here and there and sprouting into suburbs at the extremities, run straightly and sharply uphill as though impelled by the one idea of paying their respects to the Abbey, and having come within sight of it, break off admiringly in a little scattered circle around the sacred edifice leaving an open space which the inhabitants have utilised for the market afore-mentioned. There is much buying and selling going on there at present, and great heaps of vegetables, ruddy-cheeked apples, cheap toys, legs of beef and mutton, and piles of coarse crockery are being vended under a low, long roof, supported on squat

stone pillars close to the old town pump, or "pant," as North-country folk term it in their own tongue. The sun is shining brightly down on it all, on the huge grey pile and quaint gargoyles of the Abbey Church and the ruined cloisters in its rear, on the open space, the heaps of green cabbages and ruddy carrots, and the scattered groups of country people, men in frieze coats and leather leggings, and healthy, hard-featured women with soft "burring" voices, who loiter about, haggling "cannily" over every purchase or gossiping at the corners.

Just opposite to the Abbey, and looking down on the crowd—a mere handful of people taken altogether, but a crowd for this slowly dying out little city of the past—is a tall grim tower, black with age, crumbling at the edges, and pierced by

one or two loop-hole windows, high up in the wall. There is a low, arched gateway leading through it. You can see the yellow sunlight on the other side of the black, deep-browed arch; and the contrast between this stern old relic of bygone days, once the Abbot's Court House, or, as some have it, the prison, and the pleasant sunny little market-place with its comparatively modern shops, and the chattering, rosy-cheeked lasses with smart hats and bright print dresses, scattered over it, make it more like a German or Breton town than ever. As Barberry finishes her purchases, the Abbey clock strikes twelve, each deep solemn vibration seeming to quiver through the clear warm atmosphere, and startling a little cloud of pigeons from their nests in the grim old tower, into the summer blue above. They



startle Barberry too; for twelve is the hour when the doctor generally comes in from his morning visits, and can therefore be most easily seen by country patients; and she has some little walk to take before getting to his house. She turns away from the market, therefore, immediately, passing in at a little gate, leading to a rank, weed-grown square of grass, once the Abbey Cloisters, where the crumbling, richly-carved canopy of a sedilia still projects from one side of the wall enclosing it, and which at present forms the back of some stables. There is no sunlight in this deserted court; the Abbey, which shuts it in on one side, and the wall on the other, are too high. One slanting golden ray falling athwart the roof of the north transept, touches with a reverent glory the fretted pinnacles of the desecrated

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canopy; and the heavy morning dew glitters undried upon the long grass. Somehow Barberry's gay spirits disappear as she enters the silent place. There is a sadness and severity about it which chills her, and makes her feel as though she were going to meet some shrouded woe behind those massive buttresses. She is glad to hurry through it, and along a narrow flagged passage leading between high walls tufted with yellow stonecrop, and with green boughs of trees waving over them; to a breezy common outside the town, where boys are playing cricket on the sward, and little children running and laughing under the broad shade of trees; and where the brass plate of Dr. Maxwell's house glitters between laurustinus bushes at a little distance.

“Feverish, sick, pains in his back and

limbs? Humph, looks as if he were sickening for something." Such was the doctor's commentary on Berrie's description, spoken with his mouth full, as he bolts a hasty lunch and makes the girl sit down and share it with him. "Eh, going on for some days too? Look here, doesn't he go to a day-school at Wall?"

"Yes; but he's not been well enough to go for the last three days, and Louie—— What's the matter, doctor?" For the old gentleman has uttered a hasty ejaculation, and his face looks grave.

"Keep Louie away too," he says sharply. "Why that's the school where—— Now look here, I can't say anything for certain till I've seen the child; so I won't say anything at all; and you needn't go looking pale. Perhaps it is a feverish cold only."

"It doesn't seem like a cold," Berrie says meekly.

"Doesn't it? How do you know what colds seem like? I've seen a cold which twisted a man all up inside and turned him pea-green, and made him roar with pain, till he swore he'd got the cholera."

"When will you come and see him, doctor? Could you now? The mother is very anxious."

"Mothers always are. No; I can't come now; I'm due in twenty minutes at a house in Pelter's Green. That's why my horse is still in the brougham, and when I get back he'll be too tired to go out again till evening. Now, see here, don't look disappointed, for I want to see the boy if I can. How did you come? In the pony-cart?"

"Yes, doctor."

"Then, if you can wait one hour, you shall take me back in it; and that will settle matters. Wait here, if you've nothing to do in the town. Will you?"

And as Berrie gratefully and gladly assents, the kind abrupt old man bustles out, and in another minute is being driven away as fast as his wiry old grey will take him.

She does not care to wait at the house, however. It is a long while since she has visited the Abbey, always the great marvel and delight of her girlhood, from the days when she was first taken there, a wee, toddling thing, by her father, to those when a half-grown girl she used to snatch a few minutes on market days for wandering in to sit gazing at the dented iron helmet which still hangs just beneath the triforium in the nave, and weave imaginary romances for

herself respecting the long-deceased and unknown wearer. Berrie knows the sexton, who keeps the key, well, and with even a stronger desire than usual to visit her childish dream of majesty and beauty, now that she has seen St. Paul's and Westminster and even Notre Dame since she last entered its venerable portals. She hurries off, glad to think that she has quite three-quarters of an hour before her ere it is time to hunt up Tubs and her purchases, and return with both to the doctor.

She little guesses what is to happen to her before she gets there.

The boys have not yet finished their game of cricket, the sunlight has only had time to creep a little lower, gilding the grinning faces of the gargoyles and falling in a level bar of dusty gold athwart the long grass in the cloisters ; but as she enters the latter

place a sudden thrill, almost making her heart stop beating and forcing a little cry from her lips, runs through her.

A man in a grey tunic and hat made of the same material is standing there gazing upwards at the carved pinnacles of the desecrated sedilia ; a man whose whole air and appearance is so familiar to her, utterly unexpected as it is here, of all places on the earth, that it hardly needs that sunbeam to glitter on the spectacles, through which his short-sighted eyes are trying to take in the beauty of the finely-wrought stonework, for her to utter his name in a glad cry of surprise.

In the same moment he has turned, and as his gaze falls on her she has time to read the surprise written there in even more bewilderment than her own.

“*Berrie!* Is it possible?”

Only those four words; but even they are not spoken for more than one minute, or two. It seems to Berrie quite a long time that they have stood there, hand clasped in hand, gazing into each other's faces in such breathless, incredulous joy and wonder as seems to take away all power of speech. For it is a wonder that is all gladness. There has been no time to prepare for it, no time for thought, no remembrance of past pain, nor bitter brief farewells. It is simply to Berrie as if a dark cloud had been suddenly rolled away from before her eyes, and left an angel standing in the brightness. It does not matter that Randal Comyns is no angel: hardly a hero even, according to her standard. It is *he*; that is all, and that is enough; and as her hands go out to



meet his, and are clasped in a tight, close pressure, she feels as if she were being almost drawn into his arms :

A thousand little shafts of flame  
Are shivered in her narrow frame.

Her breath comes in short hurried pants upon the sweet red flower of her mouth, and her eyes fill with a quick glad moisture of which she is quite unconscious, until Randal says in a low voice, almost as if speaking to himself, and broken with a sort of reproachful tenderness :

“ And you pretended not to care ! ”

“ I did not know,” Berrie says, looking at him. It is quite true ; she did not know. Even when her obstinate loyalty to her first lover made her shut her heart sternly against every thought of this, she was

ignorant of what it was which made such thoughts a danger and a temptation. She has never dabbled in passion and learnt the taste of it before she was free to drink in its full flavour. The knowledge comes to her now with the look of his eyes, the touch of his hand, the living presence of the man she never thought to see again, just as it does to him who stands looking at her, and holding her hand like some precious jewel which might slip through his fingers if he were to let it go. It is so wonderful, that they do not even make any pretence of not understanding. There is no effort at concealment, because as yet feeling is too intense for thought, and concealment implies thought. Even the words they have said have been in a way unconscious, inaudible to themselves, as though the material part of them was in a dream, and

only soul spoke to soul. Still holding her hand, he says very softly :

“My darling! My little girl!” and then with a kind of imperious haste :

“You are not married, then? Not going to be?”

“No, not now.” For a moment she flushes; then, the gladness in her heart overflowing and rippling over her lips and eyes with a little happy laugh: “Phil liked Dolly better than me; much better. It is Dolly who will be married, not I. Oh! I am so glad.”

The last words are hardly audible, for, before they had passed her lips, Randal has taken her in his arms and kissed her.

Never, till the day when she lies cold and dead, with neither colour in her small brown face, nor warmth in her lovely parted

lips does Berrie forget that kiss ; the first, the very first that passion has ever pressed upon the blossom of her mouth, drawing

Her whole soul through  
Her lips, like sunlight drinking dew.

Yet almost before it has passed his own, Randal would have given the world, had he got it to give, to take it back ; for in that breath memory has come back to him, and at the thought of his letter to Vivian, that letter binding him anew in the bonds from which he had escaped a broken and crippled man years ago ; that letter, the answer to which must be now lying on his table at the hotel, the passionate love and joy which a moment back was flooding his veins with a tide which there is no repressing, seems to

rush back upon his own heart, leaving him cold and white as death.

Such a kiss, if not a consecration, is an outrage. He feels it so in his own soul; and the pain of it, the passion and the remorse, almost make him groan aloud: even though at the same time the feeling that she is trembling all over and shrinking from him, makes him long to draw the slim figure closer and fold it against his heart.

Fortunately Berrie has no idea of what is going on there. She is not even angry with him for the liberty he has taken. She did not think of it as a liberty, or try to resist it. He loved her before when she was bound, and she sent him away. Now they have met again when she is free, and he loves her still. He has a right to take his amends, and

it is only the virginal instinct of modesty which makes her shrink back and retreat from him as his clasp loosens. The kiss has woke her too. She remembers where she is, and how she came there, glancing with shy eyes and crimson cheeks round the quiet cloister where, by good fortune, they are still alone, save for the pigeons, flying in circles round their heads, or lighting softly on the grass with outspread tails, and glancing, peacock-tinted throats.

“Forgive me,” says Randal humbly. He has seen the glance and feels himself that this place, a quasi thoroughfare, is no place for such a meeting.

“Will you come into the Abbey? I have the key. The man left it with me; and—— I must speak to you.”

He leads the way as he speaks, and

Berrie follows without a word. Together they pass into the dim, lofty emptiness of the majestic nave of a building in which the choir alone now affords ample room for the convenience of the congregation; and which, in its naked and desolate grandeur, reminds one of a fallen archangel compelled to remain in the place of its humiliation, and humbly sheltering within its mighty arm, the feeble and earthborn infant whose parent it has become. Even the partial closing of the heavy door has a *morne* and sombre sound, making Berrie start and draw a little nearer to her companion, and instinctively he puts out his hand to her; but the cold touch of it only makes her look at him in sudden wonder, and, as she does so, a change comes over her face.

“Oh!” she exclaims, stopping short and with a sort of catch in her voice, “how ill you look! What has been the matter? Oh, you must have suffered very much to look like that.”

“I am suffering now,” says Randal, but the ghastliness which has frightened her is passing away a little as he speaks, and he tries to recover himself; “but it is not from illness. Forgive me. I did very wrong just now, I forgot myself. At least I forgot everything but you, and that I loved you. You knew I loved you before, I told you so; and there is no change in me, I love and honour you now more than I ever did. If you were a queen, I could not reverence you more; and you had given me no earthly right to forget that reverence. I did not forget it; I only remembered my own love



more. You will forgive me, will you not?"

He speaks very distinctly, with a strange unnatural enunciation—ice and fire mingling; but what he says is wholly unintelligible to Berrie's frankness and ignorance. They love each other, she knows that, feels instinctively that he knows it too, and being wholly ignorant of that letter, cannot even guess at the generous motive which makes him strive to disguise that knowledge from her. By-and-by, when she knows all, she will know why he took such pains to lay stress on his love, while ignoring hers. Now, though the colour mantles on her delicate little face, and her dark eyes widen, she only says very simply :

"I am not angry. You did not do anything wrong. I care for you too."

If he might only take her in his arms then, and kiss her again. Almost as much to shield himself from temptation as to spare her, he lays his hand on her mouth with a sudden pained gesture.

"Hush!" he says hoarsely; "do not tell me that. I cannot bear it. I had no right to make you. Oh! if I had."

For one moment she only gazes at him with dilated eyes. Then, her quick intelligence taking in the only meaning his words can hold, and the crimson blood mounting to the very roots of her hair:

"You are married," she says, in a kind of whisper.

"No," he answers aloud; "but it is the same thing. I have asked another woman to marry me; and—I know she will. I should be a blackguard if I broke faith with her now."

For a minute there is total silence. Berrie has sat down on the base of a pillar; her hands are clasped over her knee, and she seems to be looking at them, her head bent forward, so that he cannot see her face. Through the partly opened door comes the sound of voices from the market-place—a faint hum and laughter. The sunlight, falling through the traceried window makes a patch [of yellow light upon the dim lettering of the worn stone floor. Randal would give all he has to blot the last ten minutes from his life. It cannot be, however, and after a minute she rises. Her face is very pale, and she is trembling; but her voice has all its old decided tone.

“I must be going; I have to drive the doctor home. There is sickness there; but I am glad to have met you again. You

need not mind. I am glad of it; and we can always be friends."

Somehow the steady, dead tones pain him more than any tears or reproaches. She has never been so dear to him as now. There is almost a sob in his voice as he answers her :

"I am not, for I have done you a great wrong, and I would have cut off my hand first. Berrie, my little girl, won't you forgive me?"

"I have nothing to forgive; it was my fault," she says gently. Then, in a changed, lower voice: "Is it she you used to speak of?"

"Yes."

A very faint light comes into her face. It is something to the proud little heart not to have been supplanted by any newer flame, but she answers gravely :

"Then she ought to love you. I hope you will be very happy. Good-bye."

"Where are you going?" he asks, detaining her. "You said home. Do you mean you live—here?"

"No, at a farm about five miles off. I thought I told you."

"You said your home was in Northumberland; nothing more. I never questioned where. I was obliged to go to Newcastle on business—some coal mines of my father's—and having to wait a day for the return of a man whose testimony was wanted about them, I thought I might as well run down here to visit this old Abbey in place of wandering about a dingy uninteresting town. It was the merest chance we met."

Alas ! how easily things go wrong,  
A sigh too sweet, or a kiss too long ;  
There comes a mist and a driving rain,  
And the world is never the same again.

It will never be the same to Berrie; but as yet she does not know whether to be glad or sorry. Life has not been all sunshine for her, that she should be crushed by a thunder-clap. And nothing is changed after all. Only yesterday she was bracing herself to look cheerfully down the long vista of oldmaidhood which lay before her. It is there still. The only difference is that she has had a glimpse of Heaven since then; and then—the door has been shut in her face. Only a glimpse, but the brightness of it has blinded her for the moment, that is all.

“Good-bye,” she says again, and holds out her hand. But he cannot let her go so, with that crushed, white, hopeless look on her little face. After all he is only a man, though an honourable one in his way, and life has been very cruel to him.

“Good-bye,” he says passionately. “Berrie, my own dear, little love, this is very hard on us ; and I am not as good as you. Give me one kiss, that I may know we part friends at least. I may never see you again.”

Without a moment's hesitation, without even a blush, only an earnest, wistful look in her dark eyes she obeys him, laying her little hands on his shoulder that she may reach her lips to his.

A silent kiss on either side, not like the last ; but both are trembling now, and there are two tears on Berrie's white cheeks as he lets her go, nor does he make any effort to delay her. Together they leave the Abbey and pass along the sun and shade of the narrow streets, till they come to the inn where Tubs is put up, and then he stands by silently while she gives her orders and sees to

the harnessing and stowing away of the various packages, all in a matter-of-fact, business-like way, forgetting nothing, never looking at him once, but with that tightened, rigid look about the lines of her face, which is worse than tears; and yet which he dreads lest a syllable from him should relax.

Therefore there is no word spoken on either side; only, when she is seated, their hands meet in one farewell clasp; and then she drives away, and he stands bareheaded, looking after her till she is out of sight, and heedless of the ostler's open-eyed wonder, as Berrie is of the old doctor's comments on her paleness. She answers them coolly, owns that she is tired, declines his offer to drive, and then never speaks another word until they have reached the farm, and he has gone in. Even then she does not follow.



Now that it is over, that she can never see Randal more, a fierce dumb sense of misery sweeps over her ; and, in place of entering the house, she seats herself on a big stone in the barnyard, her head leaning against the wall, blind and deaf to all around but the sense of her own overwhelming loss, till she is startled by a voice at her side.

“Berrie,” says her stepmother hoarsely, “did you no’ hear me call ? Oh, lassie ! what d’ye think he says ? ’Tis small-pox ; and he doobts ’twill be a bad bout. The bairn’s very sick.”

## CHAPTER V.

### FRANK ST. CLAIR RECEIVES AN UNEXPECTED VISIT.

It is time here to return to Mrs. Bruce.

It is a bright, breezy morning, bright even in smoky London, breezy even in South Kensington, a morning four days after that on which Barberry Brown started for Hexham, when Vivian sits in her pretty workroom, an open letter, in a man's hand, lying beside her, and two or three others in a feminine one torn up and crumpled in little heaps around.

The man's letter is Randal Comyns',

asking her to be his wife. The torn up ones are her answers to him. It will be surmised, therefore, that the latter is not as easy a task to write as might have been imagined. And Vivian Bruce is looking very cross, and by no means as handsome as the Queen Anne mirror over her fireplace usually represents her.

Women of a blonde and massive physique should never be worried out of the calm serenity which is the chief attribute of their beauty. Marble, to which they are so often compared, is proverbially devoid of much expression; and though the Venus de Medici might gain in character if her brows could be puckered into an intellectual frown, she would certainly lose in beauty. The frown which puckers Vivian's at present is not intellectual, it is merely irritated and perplexed; and Vivian is not looking beautiful

as she wears it. That is not important, however, as there is no one to see her at the moment. What is of importance is that it is a week to-day since she received Randal's proposal, that he will probably be back in London to-morrow, and will certainly expect to find her letter awaiting him; and that she is no nearer writing it than she was when she first held his in her hand seven days ago.

Nay, she is not so near; for had she sat down to answer it then, in the first flush of her triumph, it would probably have been finished and despatched in half an hour, and she might now have been debating as to how soon propriety would allow her to modify the severity of those unadorned crape skirts, and reduce the size of the transparent "weepers" which float from her widow's cap.

Why didn't she do it then ?

"I wish I had, it would have been so much easier," she murmurs fractionally to herself. "What else have I been wishing for ever since his brother's death, and trying for since my husband's ? When I saw the change in him, as I did even in his first call, I trembled lest my chance should be gone : lest he should be grown too hard and bitter for anything I could do to win him back to his old place. Even after that walk in Kensington Gardens I doubted if I should ever see him again. Indeed it was a daring move on my part ; for I saw that he didn't believe in me, and only the fear that if I gave up Fanny to him she might *exploiter* me in return nerved me to try it on. I believe now that with a dozen women out of thirteen it would have failed. I have been more lucky than a dozen women. Why

don't I take my luck gratefully? Ah! if it had not come from his hands! if it had been——”

Once again, as twice before in this story, a strange, softened light comes into her beautiful face, giving it for the moment all the womanliness it lacks in general; but only to be banished immediately by a resolution which seems born of the conscious weakness. “I am a fool,” she says to herself, with an impatient gesture as though to thrust the intrusive thought away. “Married to Randal, I shall be Lady Comyns of Dingleberry, with a fine estate and nearly four thousand a year as soon as ever his father dies, and by all reports that will be very soon now. It will be the very position I have always coveted; while with the other—— Oh, why do I think of such folly? Am I

mad? Why, I doubt if he makes more than four hundred a year even now. We should starve on it, and I might even get to reproach him; while, on the other hand, if I marry Randal I can see him as often as I like. That is the good of their being such friends. He can come for long visits to Dingleberry; it will make up to me for Randal's horrid, new, cynical ways of speaking and thinking, and—— Perhaps my lord might be jealous, however. He used to be so once; but no, he could hardly suspect the very man who had helped him to win me. And if he did, I would just stand on my dignity and resent the insult so that he would have to give in. Randal may be as disagreeable as he likes, but I have one hold over him which I hadn't over my husband. He is a gentleman, and he

hates scandals. Joshua Bruce had nothing to lose in the way of dignity. He would have turned me out on the streets, or got a divorce from me any day if I had but given him the ghost of an excuse. He did damage his own name almost as much as me by his infamous will; but with Randal it would be different. The honour of his house will always come first with him, and the dread of the slightest tarnish on that will give me the upper hand whatever happens. Besides, Frank has been manageable enough hitherto, poor fellow! Why shouldn't he be the same now? I can even make his life happier under the new *régime*; and he is my cousin. I have a right to care for him. There is no harm in it. What a fool I have been to hesitate so long!"



She draws her blotting-book to her with the last thought, and, taking from it a sheet of thick note-paper with a texture like very corrugated crape, and a black border nearly half-an-inch in width, begins to write. She has other note-paper with three-quarters of an inch of border, but that is for letters to the Bruce connection. In an epistle, written to signify your acceptance of one man, it is not necessary to typify yourself too demonstratively as the relict of another. Vivian's paper is just what is correct in quality, style, and border, and the words traced upon it are equally so : graceful, tender, and dignified, waiving all unpleasant questions, yet, withal, intimating rather than expressing, a certain grateful recognition of his having permitted her to do so : the gist of it is that she accepts his offer ; and, having done so, she feels

better, rings for the page, and sends him over to deliver it at Randal's hotel, and to ask when that gentleman is expected back.

After a morning spent in this way, a woman has a right to feel hungry, and even a little exhausted. It is rather pleasant, therefore, to her to hear the lunch gong's noisy signal before long; and, as she goes down the narrow, albeit softly-carpeted stairs, she thinks, with some complacency, of how much nicer it will be to hear the swish of her train on the polished oak staircase of Dingleberry Hall, and to see the staid, powdered retainer holding open the dining-room door for her approach. Mr. Bruce's footmen, though insolent and highly paid enough, had always worn something of the air of the disguised greengrocer or restaurant waiter; and he had sternly refused to

allow them to sport a livery to which he had no right. Vivian likes liveries and powder. She likes pomp of all sorts, and of late she has been restricted to a parlour-maid and a mongrel page. The prospect of a change is not unpleasing.

Mrs. Clarke is already seated at table when her sister enters the room. The sisters have virtually lived together ever since Colonel Le Mesurier's death; and now that Mr. Bruce has also departed from this world, their joint residence has become an established fact. To Fanny it is almost a necessity that it should be so, her individual means being of the smallest. It is this fact, indeed, which gave such weight to her resolve not to be cast aside as a sin-offering to Captain Comyns; and from natural indolence, as well as long course of habit, Vivian has grown to depend almost

equally on her sister ; and even in a degree to allow herself to be scolded and managed by the latter.

"Where have you been?" she asks languidly, as she takes her seat.

"Cold chicken?"

"Yes, please. Breast, if there is any. I haven't seen you all the morning."

"No, for I've been out," says Fanny, carving briskly, and helping the lady of the house to all the titbits in a way the latter could hardly have done for herself, though she expects it as a matter of course.

"You said you were going to write letters, so I thought you wouldn't want to be disturbed."

"I only wrote one letter; but it was rather important," Vivian answers, smiling.  
"It was my answer to Randal's proposal."

"My dear Vi, do you mean to say that that had not been sent before?"

"There is no hurry. He is out of town still; and if he were not, it would do his lordship good to feel that I am not too anxious to jump down his throat."

"I hope you expressed pretty plainly your readiness to walk down it. Please to think of your own good as well as his."

"Don't be afraid," says Vivian, smiling complacently. "Fanny, do you think, under the circumstances, that sealskin would be permissible by Christmas? I do detest crape mantles, they are so unbecoming; besides, nothing is so warm as fur."

"Bee says sealskin is always permissible; but I really think there are no rules now-

a-days. Poor Bee! what a state she was in this morning about this stupid affair!"

"What affair? I didn't know you had been there."

"I went to help her to pack. They go off to Eastbourne to-morrow, and that maid of hers is such an idiot she can do nothing; but I found Bee in floods of tears over this news about Frank, and she did pretty well nothing but fuss and whimper all the time."

"About—Frank?" It does not sound like Vivian's voice, and yet she is putting a strong constraint on herself. She will not even lay down her knife and fork.

"Yes; didn't you know? I told Bee you had said nothing to me about it; but I thought he made you his confidante in everything."

"I can't know till you tell me what this thing is. As for Bee, she makes a fuss over everything, from a death to a gnat bite. He is not—ill?"

"No, of course not; and, as I tell her, to my mind the Indian climate is likely to suit him much better than this. Indeed, I must say, Vi, that for many reasons I think it a very sensible move; and I half hoped"—with a shrewd glance at her sister—"that you had counselled it."

"I do not know, till you tell me what it is."

She says it, not looking up or moving, in the same flat tone as before. It is as if she had been saying it all her life, and knew no other form of words.

"Do you mean that he hasn't told you—really? Why he is going to India almost directly. He has accepted some legal ap-

pointment in Bengal. I forget what it is exactly, but it's a capital thing, high salary and a life affair. I think it's the best piece of luck he has ever had, and I told Bee so, but, of course, she's inconsolable for the moment. It seems he only told her last night; and the idea of his sailing in a month has quite upset her."

Vivian does not answer. She is very busy cutting her chicken into small square dice, and eating each piece deliberately. They might be bits of chalk or wood for any knowledge that she has of their taste, and Mrs. Clarke, looking at her and knowing her ways, begins to wish she had never said anything about Frank's sudden decision.

"After all, nothing could be better for him," she resumes in a slightly querulous tone, the result of nervousness and self-



disapprobation, "of course, we shall all miss him just at first, and for that reason one might wish he were not going till after your marriage; but, in any case, once you were living in the country you would see very little of him. Norfolk is a good way from London, and even if it were nearer it would make no difference. If I know anything of Randal Comyns it is that he's not the sort of man to stand another, even an intimate friend, running in and out of his house, tame-cat fashion. And you don't want to have all the old unpleasantness over again, I'm sure. You must be more careful this time, Vivian."

"Thanks very much for the advice; but there is no need for you to emulate Bee, and become tearful over it," Vivian says calmly. "Had she no other news by-the-way? I suppose she does go to Eastbourne

this afternoon ? Frank's departure a month hence need hardly interfere with that." And, for all her skill, Mrs. Clarke cannot tell whether Vivian was really as moved as she had supposed, or whether she was aware of the whole matter beforehand. She determines, nevertheless, and for her sister's own sake, to keep a careful watch on her.

It is not an easy matter, however. Vivian says nothing more, but orders the carriage after lunch, and goes out. Being mistress she has, of course, a right to do so ; and, as Fanny has been out herself all the morning there is an excuse for not asking her to accompany her. She can only look from the window after her troublesome sister ; and as, for nearly all errands whether of business or pleasure, Vivian must take the turn which leads town-

wards, she does not gain much by the move.

"I believe she has gone off to try and catch Bee and learn all about it from her. Who would have guessed she could be so foolish?" Fanny says to herself. She is wrong, however. General and Mrs. Parker reside in Brook Street, Grosvenor Square, whereas Vivian has simply told her coachman "The Strand," and then leans back in her seat with closed eyes, and a face more like a statue than ever from the absence of the delicate bloom that generally adorns it. Only once, as they pass the hotel where Randal lately put up, she glances upward, and makes a sudden movement as if to give a new order; but the impulse is checked before it can be carried into execution, and she sinks back again, murmuring between her teeth:

"It will be time enough on my return—  
*if I fail.*"

They arrive at the Strand, and she tells the man to put her down at that delightful little corner shop which displays photographs from Albert Moore and Simeon Solomon's pictures in its windows, and then to go on to the Stores in the Hay-market, with a list of purchases to be made up.

"You will wait for me there," she adds; and then, as the tiny victoria rolls away, Vivian turns round and walks briskly eastwards.

Frank St. Clair's natty little parlour in the Temple is strangely untidy to-day. The table is littered with papers, the sofa and floor with books; he is standing by the former very busy in sorting, tearing up, and putting on one side, when

there is a tap at the door, and his boy says :

“Mrs. Bruce, sir,” and, without waiting for permission, Vivian enters.

It is not the first time she has been there, Beatrice Parker, Fanny, and she have taken five o'clock tea in the barrister's chambers, and been daintily served and assiduously waited on more than once ; and she has visited him several times with other people, and once or twice alone on little matters of business. There is even an armchair in one corner, which she once told him laughingly was the easiest she had ever known, and in which he has never from that day allowed anyone else to seat themselves. Yet, when she enters the room to-day, by his violent start and face, first flushed and then ashen pale,

it is evident that in all his life Frank's eyes had never met a more unexpected vision.

"Vivian!" he says breathlessly; and she, very white, but looking at him with an odd, painful smile,

"Yes, it is I. No wonder you look guilty." Then, coming nearer, and putting out her hand to him: "Frank, what does this mean? You are not going away—going to leave me! It isn't true! You couldn't do it. Oh! why did they say so!" All the years he has known her he has never seen her speak or give way like this. He did not think it was in her; but, unconsciously even to herself, the wear and tear of the morning's decision have taken away much of her native self-command and power of acting. For once at least in her life she is stirred, and shows it; and

he, self-restrained man as he is, is more shaken by this weakness in the idol he has adored, without hope or defalcation, all his life, than he could have believed possible. He answers her as frankly as she has spoken :

“Yes, I am going. Vivian, why did you come here? I should have told you soon. I meant to do so; but it is only just settled, and I could not lose the chance. You must have known that—that it would be impossible for me to stay here after your marriage.”

“Why?” she says breathlessly. “Frank, are you mad or cruel? Why should you go now? I was married before.”

“Yes, to a man you never cared for, and who was not even kind to you; a vulgar-minded money-jobber, whose coarse illiterateness threw you on other men for society,

and whose jealousy rather irritated than protected you. You wanted a defender then, a brother if you had had one, a brother-cousin since you had not ; some-one just to stand at your side and keep the gadflies off you ; and—because I loved you, because you were the one object of my life—I was content at any cost to myself to take that position ; but now—— It is quite different now. You do not want me for——”

“ But I do,” she pleads, her eyes swimming in unwonted tears, her beautiful lip trembling as even little Barberry’s might have done. “ I want you more than ever. I don’t know what you mean. What is different ? ”

“ *What ?* ” and for a moment even she shrinks and colours beneath the flash in his eyes. “ Need you ask me ? You, who are



now going to marry a man you do love, the object of your first woman's choice, the man who has loved you and been separated from you for years. He has asked you again to marry him, and you have told me that you will. It was from my lips he first learnt the fact. It was I who, acting as your mouthpiece, told him that if he had been wronged it was not by you. I could do that because I loved you so dearly that your happiness was more to me than my own; but, Vivian dear, there are limits to everything—even my endurance. I don't grudge Randal Comyns his good fortune, if it is to make your life glad; but I cannot stay here and look at it; and," with a decision which flushes his thin, dark face, and makes it almost stern, "I will not; no, not even to please you."

"And I," she says, flushing too, and

leaning forward till her hands, which have been lying in his, slide upwards and rest on his arm, "I will not marry Randal Comyns if you do not. How can he or any other man make up to me for your loss?"

"But you love him," Frank repeats; raising his own hands to press her gently back. "You told me so. Is not he enough to you?"

"No, no, no! And I do not. It was a lie. I never loved him, except for a little bit, when I was a girl and flattered by his looks and position, and by his adoration for me. It was you I loved. It is you now; not he! Frank, have pity on me."

"*Me!*" He says it in a faint, dizzy voice, still holding her back. For the moment indeed it seems to him that he is mad or dreaming—that he cannot have heard aright. "*Me!* Vivian, are you

mocking me? You care for me? My God, if so; why, all these years, have you pretended——”

“Why? Oh, Frank, why do you ask me? Be generous. How could we marry? We were too poor. We had nothing, either of us; and at first I did not think I cared so much. I thought the feeling would die out. Starved plants always die; and our childish love had to be starved. It was your goodness all through my married life that fed it; and now—— I cannot do without you. There! you know it all now, and—you won’t go. You won’t leave me! I cannot marry Randal Comyns if you do.”

“No, I will not leave you; but you will not marry Randal Comyns either,” Frank answers, taking her suddenly and firmly in his arms and holding her while he speaks. “I shall take you with me.

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What do you suppose I am made of? Do you think that, once knowing you care for me, I will ever let you go again? Hush! Be silent. It is my turn now. I have been your slave for years, have held myself in; and borne with, and struggled against, a very hell of suffering, just to be near you and serve you. And what was the good? Were you really happy? Would you be happier now, married to a man with whom I have been ready to quarrel a dozen times of late, because he was marrying you—and I could see it—from honour and compassion, not from love. Vivian, you are heaven and earth to me; but you have cared too much for money, and too little for love. Well, you will have money now and love too. We shall not be as rich as Randal, but with this appointment and what you have

of your own, we shall be rich enough. You won't be an English baronet's wife, but you will be a queen in India. You shall have servants, luxuries, all you can want; and love—love and adoration into the bargain; for every day of my life I shall be worshipping you more and more for having come to me. And if you do not—mark this, dear—I shall go all the same; and I will never see you again. I shall not wish to."

"Did a page from Mrs. Bruce leave a note and message here to-day for Captain Comyns?"

"Yes, madam."

"I am Mrs. Bruce. The boy brought me back word that Captain Comyns was not expected till to-morrow. If so, my letter is useless, and will only give him

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unnecessary trouble. Will you allow me to take it back and leave another in its stead?"

"I beg your pardon, ma'am, but——"

"You want to be sure I am the person I claim to be. Quite right; but if you compare the notes, you will see the paper and handwriting are the same; and I will give you my card as a further guarantee. Thank you. You will find it is all correct. Much obliged."

## CHAPTER VI.

CONTAINING MUCH CORRESPONDENCE.

BUT Captain Comyns does not return to London on the morrow, or for many morrows to come.

There is trouble down at the old Hall in Norfolk ; trouble which extends down to the little village which scatters itself along one irregular street, terminating in a triangular green and a crumbling square-towered church about half a mile from the park gates. Sir Comyn Comyns, the blind and widowed owner of the estate, who for nearly sixty years has ruled his little domain

with an autocratic benevolence which has made him popular as well as respected, lies dying behind those jealously - curtained windows overlooking my lady's garden; and little knots of anxious, curious gossips gather in groups outside the alehouse door, or even straggle up to the nearest lodge-gate to make inquiries for "t' squire," with faces as grave and excited, and a sense of the importance of the impending calamity rather stronger, than if the individual *in extremis* were her Gracious Majesty the Queen.

"To think it ha' coom at last," as one old peasant says to another, propping his rusty, smock - frocked back against the churchyard wall, so as to better look up into his comrade's face: "An' t' squire an' passon walkin' out o' t' door theer, last Sabbath day as was, for a' t' world as hale,



lookin' one as t' oother. Eh! 'tis an awful succumstance farely; an' to be aloan, too, when a' were took! A dunna min' livin' aloan maself; but to *die* aloan, an' wi' young squoire away at t' moines knowin' nothin'——"

"T' young squoire's not away, Tummas Baines," breaks in the shrill female voice of a neighbour, who has stopped to listen. "Dunna ye think it, an' his feyther half way to t' oother world. Arld Mrs. Dencher at t' south lodge zays as a' ware zent for less nor an hour after t' squoire wor struck down."

"An' coomed up by retarn train," adds the second old man. "I zaw un maself at t' station. A' were as whoite as a loomp o' chalk a' were; and, zays I, 'Ma dooty to 'ee, squoire,' I zays, 'an' main zorry us

all bees for t' arrand as has zoommoned of 'ee back,' zays I, a 'oldin' ma head down an' ma hat again ma belly, tho' the rain it were a' poorin' down loike thoonder; but ye zee I vinks to maself, 't' young squoire 'll be squoire outright afoor marnin,' vinks I, 'and 'tis no toime for forgettin' a man's manners.' But, Lard! ye wouldn't ha' thought theer were another body within vifty moile o' 'm, for all the notice a' took o' I; but just joomped on Black Queen, t' mare as were a' waitin', an' rode off like a zhot. 'Now,' zays I to maself, 'if I'd been my lard the dook——' But eh! there's rich and there's poor in t' warld as is to-day!"

"Belike a' didn't 'ear 'ee truly," the woman suggests in a soothing tone. "A'

must ha' been main took oop. Zir Comyn's death'll be a great change for 'ee ; more'n it would be fur most. T'old squoire niver did raight by Mester Randal."

"No; a' set t'whole o' his heart on t'other un. Well, lads, 'twere no wonder. Mister Comyns were a foine-lookin' young man as iver was, a' were."

"No'an foiner than Mister Randal afoor a spailt 'as eyesaicht, an' scorched his hair off, in that daundered foire."

"Mistress Lucking, that foire were in our greecious Queen's service, zo 'twould be treason to speak ill o't; but for all that, Mister Randal's no'an zo dandy lookin' a youngster, he's a good zon; an' I'll bet my hat as 'twas a sore an' grievous shock to un to come whoam an' fin' t' old squoire lyin' atween loife and death, as is at t' present."

The old peasant is right. Upstairs in that darkened room on the first floor—his mother's room, and endeared by many a childish reminiscence—Randal Comyns sits by the old-fashioned four-post bed, holding a hand which hourly grows colder and heavier in his, with a heart colder and heavier still. His father is dying, dying none the less surely that it is a slow, lingering death; and, though he has not been a kind father, though he has never cared much for this son of his, and, until the last few weeks, has always felt and found that the pleasantest times to him are the times when they are apart, Randal has cared for him with an odd, dogged, half-ashamed caring; has admired, ay, even loved him enough to suffer, far more acutely than he would ever have allowed anyone to guess, from the un-

natural dislike of the old man, who, whatever he may be in himself, is the author of the younger one's existence. And just of late Sir Comyn has seemed to recognise this almost pathetic, because so utterly gratuitous, tenderness in his neglected son, and to show a tardy appreciation and gratitude for it. Only of late; a matter of eight or ten weeks at most; but now that the end has come, Randal, cynical, world-worn traveller as he is, would not barter those weeks for as many years of selfish happiness.

For the end is very near at present. It is just a week since Randal was summoned from Newcastle by a badly-worded telegram, informing him that his father had had a paralytic stroke, and that if he wished to see him alive he must come at once; and the young man lost not a

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moment in obeying. He left Newcastle by the next train.

Sir Comyn was lying on the same bed when he arrived as he is lying on now ; lying stiff and rigid, with closed eyes and livid face, dead to all outward appearance, dead actually so far as sight, hearing, taste, or motion constitute life. The doctor, however, has told Randal that a second stroke had followed the first before the young man's arrival, and that a third will probably supervene ere the end.

"And when that will be it is impossible to say," he adds. "It may come within an hour ; it may not be (it is my duty to warn you of this) for several weeks. You will observe that he can still swallow without much difficulty, and experience teaches us that in cases of this sort life may be sustained on an almost infinitesimal quantity

of nourishment. When there is no waste of the tissues there is naturally less needed to support them; that is why your Doctor Tanners and other fasting charlatans stay in bed, and pass their time in sleeping as much as possible. But you look pale, Mr. Comyns; of course this is very distressing to you." (The doctor is as well aware as most people of Sir Comyn's long-nourished antipathy to his heir.) "But I may add it is a most unlikely supposition. In all probability the squire will not last more than a few days at farthest, and in the meantime I need not tell you that your presence here," with a gesture to indicate the sick-room, "is not in the slightest degree requisite, or to be expected. It was quite right to send for you, of course. Indeed, the butler who was with him when he began to recover from his first stroke,

says that he stretched out his arm and tried to utter your name ; but he has been quite unconscious ever since, and is likely to continue so."

"But not till the end?" Randal interrupts, a look of keen, distressful pain in his eyes, though his voice is cool and steady. "He will surely recover—be able to know us at any rate before then."

"It is highly improbable, so much so, at any rate, that unless there is a speedy change for the worse, I do not think you need feel bound to remain within the house. He has a very attentive nurse, I know, and will not be likely to require you," and with a friendly nod, intended to be reassuring, the medical man departs.

Then, and not till then, Randal Comyns' stern composure gives way, and kneeling



down by the bed he puts his slight, worn fingers into that rigid, outstretched hand, and, stooping his head over the pallid face, speaks:

“Father, I am here. I came at once. Do you know me, father? Your boy, Randal! I have come to stay with you.”

No answer; though the words are repeated more than once. No quiver even in the wrinkled eyelids, or movement of the sunken, bluish mouth. The doctor was right; this is death in life indeed, and it matters nothing who goes or stays by it. For a moment Randal hesitates, and then, moved by a sorrowful, reverent impulse, born of his utter impotence to help, or comfort, in this living death, him who has given him life, he stoops his tall head lower still and touches the old man's brow with his lips. Something

moves against his hand as he does so, and he looks down with a start. The stiff and icy fingers of the squire's left hand have relaxed and then reclosed in a feeble clasp over his own.

For the first time for years Randal Comyns, the free-thinker, cries out from his heart, "Thank God !" That movement has told him that his father knows him, and he is gladder of it than of a kingdom.

That is why he is sitting there now ; as, with only brief absences for food and rest, he has sat ever since. Sir Comyn is still alive. He gives no other sign of his being so. His face never changes. His lips never open. The words spoken now by one, now by another, find no answer even in a sign ; but when Randal is away for a few moments the two middle fingers of that left hand straighten and move, very

feebly, very stiffly, but with an unmistakeable air of feeling for something, and when his son returns, and lays his own hand over them, they close round it again, and remain so peacefully. No other hand has the same effect. They have tried it, and the attempt has been a failure. Sir Comyn wants his son only; and Randal knows it, and is glad. Not for worlds would he have those feeble fingers seek for him in vain for one moment, if he could help it.

So he sits there, and a second week goes on; then a third and a fourth. It is on the second day of the fifth week since his seizure that, as Randal is trying to read by the dim light of dawn, he is conscious of a faint, inarticulate sound from the bed, and, bending over it, sees that his father's face is working with a strange, painful contortion.

He is evidently trying to speak ; but for a long time the effort is in vain, and then sleep comes upon him from the exhaustion of it, and they think he may die before awakening.

He does not ; and when he awakes his eyes open, and the effort to speak is renewed, this time successfully, though only Randal hears the low, feebly - fashioned words, uttered with long breaks between, like a child trying to talk.

“How long—*will*—this—last?”

For a second Randal hesitates ; then low, too, but clearly :

“Not very long now, I fear, father.”

“I—am glad. It—will—be your day—soon.”

No answer this time. It is true ; yet Captain Comyns would willingly give ten years of his life to put it off. Only that

his father's coldness has always checked any demonstrativeness in him he would say so.

"Be—a good master. You—have—been a good son—very. God bless you."

"I will try," Randal says gently.

"And" (with more vehemence) "get married. You must now—promise. No man—settles down without—a wife."

"I will, sir. I intend to do so." He might add that he has partly carried out the intention. The recollection that he has done so flashes on his mind like a ray of lightning as he speaks, startling and almost making him stammer; not so much by the thought of the fact itself, as that the last weeks of anxiety and preoccupation have sufficed to blot it out so completely. Why, Vivian's answer to his letter must be actually waiting at the hotel for him all

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this time. He will telegraph for it to-morrow ; but how she must wonder at not having heard from him before ; nay, at not having seen him at her feet. Ah ! well, she will have to excuse him when she knows the cause. But his father is going on speaking, louder and with less difficulty this time.

“That is right. Don’t—make me an excuse for delay. Find a—good woman and—marry her. Not a fine lady—only, like that—damned, fickle jade who made a fool of you before ; but—honest—pure—your mother’s sort. Keep up the honour——”

The sentence is never finished or answered. His voice dwindles away into incoherency and stops. There is a slight convulsion about his mouth ; and Randal springs to his feet and tears at the bell-

pull. The third stroke has fallen upon the poor old baronet; and before noon he has passed away into the unknown void of eternity.

It is not till the morning of the next day but one afterwards that Randal brings himself to open Vivian's letter. It has arrived for him on the previous evening; lies indeed on his study-table, wooing him in his grief and loneliness with suggestions of comfort and companionship—that best companion of all and sweetest comfort, a wife? But to Randal the very sight of the once familiar handwriting has become repugnant since those last words of Sir Comyn have deprived him of his highest motive for marrying the woman who has penned it.

Not even by his marriage will he please his father now. That one consolation in

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the ruin of his own hopes is taken from him; and by the disheartening pain of its destruction he learns how much store he has set by it; and what an important factor it was in the reasons which led him to re-bind himself to the conquering car of Vivian Bruce.

“What good even to read her letter!” he mutters as he takes it up and surveys the outside with a wearied, incurious air, strangely at variance with the received idea of a lover holding in his hand his mistress’s acceptance. “I know what she will say; almost the very words she will use: very proper words, charmingly put together of course, but—— Ah, well! it’s done now and may as well be done decently. She will be surprised enough at not having heard from me sooner, but my answer will explain that. Vivian likes



a title. She will forgive me when she knows that I can give her one sooner than she expected." With that bitter sneer on his lips he tears open the deeply black-bordered envelope and reads—Vivian's refusal!

"No, my dear friend, it cannot be. I am grateful, truly grateful for your proposal, for I appreciate the mingled generosity and compassion which prompt you to make it; and I do not even feel angry with you for rating me so low as to think that such compassionate generosity, with the good things of life which you have to bestow, are sufficient now for the woman by whom you considered yourself wronged, and whom you are willing to forgive, though not to trust, and to marry, though not to love! Nay,

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for the memory of my early affection for you, I forgive you. I will not even see that there is anything insulting in your offer; for I can understand that, through me, however innocently, your vanity has been made to suffer more than once; and, though I certainly cannot marry you—pardon me if I say I would not now, if I could—I feel sincerely sorry to be forced to pain you again by telling you so, and I trust that you will not refuse the friendship which I have already tried (I fear ineffectually) to show you is all I have now to offer. Believe me, my dear Captain Comyns, this is the best for both of us. An early love, slain in bitterness and ill-feeling, could only be revived in a maimed and distorted form at best; and I do not like deformities! You will think I am too proud, perhaps; but, even in my

poverty and widowhood, I do not fear to say that I require more than you can give me in the man I take for a second husband. Love and worship may not equal a title and a long rent-roll; but to a woman's heart they are worth far more; and only those who are willing to lay them at my poor feet, can get them in return.

“Your friend in all kindness,

“VIVIAN BRUCE.”

For a moment he sits staring at this, as if too confounded to be able to take in its full signification; then, as his eye catches the familiar writing of Frank St. Clair among a pile of other letters waiting for him, he snatches it and opens it eagerly, as if seeking for a solution of the mystery. This time he is not dis-

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appointed. The barrister's letter is a good deal shorter, but it is plain and to the point.

"MY DEAR RANDAL,

"I have wasted too much time and too many spoken and written words already, in trying to urge you on to a reconciliation and marriage with my cousin Vivian, to feel that I need make as much apology for this as some men might. I knew that you had cared for her once. I thought that she cared for you, and, so thinking, I was willing for her sake to strain every nerve in my power in bringing about a reunion between you; though, in doing so, I had destroyed the one ray of hope and happiness in my own life. To-day I have found out that I was wrong. It is not you she cares for,

but me; and when I tell you that, never guessing this, I have loved her my whole life—that she is the one woman in the world to me, and will be while I live—I need hardly add that, discovering this, I am not disposed to surrender her to any other man—even you. It is a comfort to me to know that, though this may touch your pride, it will not wound your affections; seeing that, since your return to England this time, you have often irritated me almost past endurance by your vaunted coldness, and utter want of appreciation of her. If, nevertheless, you consider that, in taking your place, I am betraying our friendship for one another, you have a perfect right to quarrel with me; and I shall not even defend myself. For one thing—I like

you (apart from Vivian) too well. For another—I am too happy!

“Your friend sincerely, and in any case,

“FRANK ST. CLAIR.”

It is rather a distressing thought to Randal, later on, and when he is able to recall it, that in this solemn house of mourning, with his father lying dead upstairs and even the autumn sunshine excluded from the room in which he sits, he could not keep himself from springing to his feet and clasping both hands together with the heartiest, “Heaven be praised! This is too lucky;” that he has uttered since the days of his youth. But, indeed, for the moment an almost boyish exultation, an overmastering sense of freedom, sudden, absolute, and delicious, sweeps

away every other thought; and it is hard work even to keep a decent veil on his gladness in the few lines of answer which he sends to his friend.

“DEAR FRANK,

“Please accept my heartiest congratulations. So far from wanting to quarrel with you, I wish you and Mrs. Bruce every joy. When is it to be, and why the deuce didn’t you manage your affairs better?

“Yours very cordially,

“R. C.

“P.S.—Only opened yours to-day or would have written sooner. If you’ve seen the notice of my father’s death you will understand why. He was struck down by paralysis a month ago and I never left him till the end.”

To Vivian he does not write at all. "She has wound it all up so beautifully it would be a pity to spoil the effect by an answer," he says to himself with somewhat mirthful lips, as he glances a second time over Mrs. Bruce's epistle. "How clever she is! and how beautifully she manages to put me in the wrong, and so leave me the erring and pardoned sinner and herself the noble and dignified victim! Ah! well, 'tis a good game that's well over, and if she does care for Frank she must have some good in her. I'll give them the royalest wedding-present that money can buy if only in gratitude. Ah! Berrie, my little girl, haven't I cause to be grateful for the freedom which gives me back to you!"

And, despite all sorrow for his late heavy loss, he is grateful and glad too; glad



exceedingly. Indeed, it is hard to keep the happiness within him from shining out of his eyes, and yet—who knows!—perhaps he should have tried harder. At any rate his punishment is not long in coming.

## CHAPTER VII.

### POOR BARBERRY !

It is a windy, wet, changeful day, warm in the transient gleams of sunshine, cold in the longer spaces of cloud and gloom, when a gentleman stands just outside the porch of Stanefell Farm, gazing up at the house with a curious, puzzled expression. The windows are all wide open, and through them he can see a vista of bare and empty rooms—some stripped even of their paper—while there does not seem to be anyone living in the place, or to be seen in its

neighbourhood. Indeed, it is with a decided feeling of relief that, after wandering round the outside of the house, and even entering it, in search of somebody of whom to make inquiries, he comes at last upon an old man engaged in whitewashing a scullery in the rear, and appeals to him for information.

"Isn't this Farmer Brown's place; or have he and his family left it? I was told they lived here."

"Aye, an' ye'll be richt; but they're a' awa' the noo."

"Away? How's that? Are they living elsewhere?"

"Eh no, sir; no for gude, that is. The family are but gaun doon to young Mr. Souter's fairm, to get ower their trouble a bittie; an' have the entire hoose cleaned an' deesinfected."

“Disinfected! They have had illness here then? Who was it—what——?”

Too greatly shocked at the idea to think of what he is saying, Randal is hurrying out questions in sharp, imperious haste; when he is recalled to himself by seeing the open-eyed wonder on the old labourer's face, and adds more civilly:

“I beg your pardon, my man; but you startled me. I am a friend,” he says it proudly and frankly, “of one of the family—Miss Brown; and I had hoped——”

“To fin’ her? Eh, sir, I’m sair grievit for you. Ye’ll no be doin’ that either here or at the ither fairm. Will ye no have haird——?”

“What? No. For heaven’s sake tell me.”

“O’, their getting the sma’ pock here. ’Twas the twin laddie tuik it first, an’ a’ the ithers were to be sentit away; but

naething wad set puir Miss Barbara but to stay an' nurse her brither her own sel'. Ye'll see 'twas this gait—Mistress Brown had no been vacceenated, an' the puir lassie she had, an' ne'er jaloused \* as she wad take it on top o' that securitee. Eh, but 'twas a sair mistake for her."

"My God! You don't mean that she did take it—that they let her?"

"She did, sir. She sickened as the laddie was gettin' betther. His was but a sma' wee touch o' it after a'; but wi' the lass 'twas different. Maybe she was no sae sthrong as she suld ha' been; an' her stepmither says she'll ne'er forgi'e hersel' for lettin' her rin the risk; but who culd ha' guessed 'twould ha' fallen sae sairly on a brisk bonny lass like her? An' noo that she is gaen——"

\* Suspected.

“Gone! She is dead, then?” Randal says, with a strange, sickly smile, a strange, unnatural voice, sounding hardly human on the silence; for the workman, startled by a sudden view of the ghastly pallor of his listener’s face, has broken off suddenly in his narration. “That is what you have to tell me? I come too late, it seems. She—is dead.”

“Deid? Nay, nay, sir; the Lord be thankit, no’ that; but she was verra bad; sae bad they scarce luikit to see her rise up again. ’Twas a hard fecht for her; and noo they say as she’ll be sair markit to her deein’ day; but I’ve no’ seen her mysel’ to tell, for they’ve sentit her and the laddie away to a warrm place to get better. Maybe ye’ll ha haird tell o’ it, for ’tis a foreign pairt that folk do speak verra highly of for a weenter abode. Grange-ower-San’s

they ca' it, ower in Lancashire, langside the sea; and she an' the bairn are there togither. They tell me he'll be a' richt in time; but for her, puir lassie—an' 'tis a sorrowfu' dread for a maid an' a weel-favoured one—nae mon will ever luik wi' liking on the face o' her again."

"No, no; I cannot see him; I will not. I cannot see anyone."

It is Berrie who is speaking—poor trembling Berrie—clutching with weak, chilly hands at the edges of the table, behind which she stands, while she instinctively turns her disfigured face from the door where the small lodging-house servant is waiting for an answer.

"The gentleman is very urgent, miss. He says he won't tire you or keep you long; but he's come a great distance, and——"

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“Yes, yes ; I know. But I can’t see anyone. I’m very sorry. You must tell him so : but I can’t—I can’t indeed ;” and this time the answer is given with such almost passionate determination, that the little maid departs without further parley, and even forgets to close the door behind her. It is for this reason that Berrie can hear her message being given ; then a voice very grave and subdued—but, ah ! how strangely, sorrowfully familiar—saying something in reply, and the small maid answering in the same tone. After that a man’s footsteps going down the little oil-clothed lobby, the shutting of the front door, and—all is quiet. He has gone then at last ! She has sent him away, and, though that is what she wants—though a moment back she was sick and trembling with the fear lest he might disregard her refusal to see him



and make his way in, in spite of it—the security that he has not done so fills her with no joy or thankfulness; rather with a heavy, hopeless sensation of sorrow, crushing her down so completely that, as she kneels by the window and, holding the curtains together that she may not be seen herself, watches a tall figure, clad in rough tweeds, marching away in the direction of the station, her head sinks gradually down upon her clasped hands; and, unable to bear up any longer, she sobs aloud, letting the tears trickle over her pale cheeks without even an effort to wipe them away.

Is that the last glimpse she will ever have of him? and oh! if so, why would he not even turn his head once? He must have guessed that she would be watching him. Will she never, never, never see his face again?

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It is more than a month since Berrie first stood on her feet after that visitation of small-pox, which so nearly cost her her life, and which has cost her her beauty for the present, at any rate. She suffered terribly during that time of illness from pain and delirium. She has suffered nearly as much since from weakness and that worst form of low spirits—the depression of tardy convalescence; but all her suffering has been as nothing to this self-inflicted one, this penalty of shutting herself away and bolting the door against the tenderness and sympathy which would have been dearer to her than any other, because—she is so ugly!

So ugly! So (even in her own shrinking sight) hopelessly and repulsively ugly; and she remembers only too well all that Randal has said to her on these very hills about the

virtues of grace and beauty in a woman. She can even repeat to herself his very words said one day among the woods ; words which he would cut out his tongue if he could recall them to-day ; but which, spoken in an idle hour and in one of his bitterest and most cynical moods, come horribly back upon her sick and aching heart at present.

“It is bad enough for a woman to be plain ; but actual ugliness in her I count a sin. Indeed, I’m not sure that I shouldn’t consider a man justified in getting a divorce from a wife whom he married as a pretty-looking girl and saw slowly transformed into one of those faded, shapeless dowdies, to which your *beauté du diable* too often comes. Fancy being compelled for the whole of your natural life to sit opposite to a woman who makes you shiver every time

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you look at her. It would be worse than penal servitude."

And Berrie has shivered more than once since the day when she first took the glass from the hands of her reluctant attendant and gazed almost incredulously at the blurred, colourless image reflected in it; since that still worse day when she heard the foolish old North-country woman who had nursed her, telling one of the servants that "Miss had been wonderfu' quick in getting on her feet an' about again after sic a sharp attack; but 'twas a' the worse for the spots when it happened so. The skin would dry as it were, an' leave her markit dreadfu' a' her life. Mair the peety for a lass whose face was a' the fortune she wad have!" And of course the poor child swallowed the silly dictum as if it were Gospel truth; and never saying a word

about it, accepted her fore-doomed penalty, with an indifference which had its root in that carelessness of life, either in the present or future, which those few minutes in Hexham Abbey have bequeathed to her ; and which only Randal's reappearance has transformed into keenest anguish. Not for her shall he ever be made to go through that form of penal servitude to which he had alluded ; yet how hard it has been to steel herself against the little note which, blistered with tears, lies on the window-sill beside her now ! How more than hard to prevent herself from uttering a glad cry and rushing out into the strong arms ready for her when, scarcely believing her own eyes and ears, she saw him pass the window of their little sitting-room the evening before, and heard him asking for her at the door. ‘Does Miss Brown live here ? I came from

Stanefell to-day; and her father asked me to call on her. Will you inquire if she can see me?"

So like Randal that, with his precise, almost priggish punctiliousness of decorum with regard to anything affecting a woman! He might have chosen now and then to disregard these when Berrie was a stranger and nothing to him; but now that he is coming to her as a lover, now that he knows she loves him, he will not even enter her presence without having it clearly understood that he has her parent's permission to do so, as well as her own. Not by him shall his future wife's dignity be ever compromised, even to the extent of a vulgar joke from a lodging-house keeper or a knowing smile from a servant. This is one of Captain Comyns' "fads," perhaps the one which Vivian, with her Jersey

rearing, found it hardest to endure in her betrothed ; but Berrie has little heart to quarrel with it at present. The proud, pugnacious little farmer's daughter is different. She does not mind being set on a pedestal, or wooed with the

Best love of all, that love where awe  
For womanhood stands love before.

Yet she would not see him all the same. She invented a deliberate lie—as deliberate at any rate as a flurried head, and heart beating like a steam-engine, could let it be, and said she was not strong enough to see anyone just then ; and Randal did not press it at the time ; he went away and wrote her a little note, the first real love-letter she ever had in her life—for I doubt if poor Phil's epistles could have

come under that category—and which ran as follows :

“MY OWN DEAREST LOVE,

“I ought not to have taken you by surprise this evening, but I wanted to see you so much, I could not wait. Dearest Berrie, they have told me all about your illness and how you took it, you good brave little sister! And I want to try and comfort you for all you have suffered. I want you to comfort me too; for I have lost my father. He died just a month ago, leaving me all the more alone in the world, that after all (you need not comfort me for this!) Vivian has jilted me once more. She was wise, and preferred her cousin. That is why I have hurried to you as soon as necessary business



would set me free ; and so be kind to me, little Barberry blossom, and let me come to you to-morrow morning. Your father and mother have both given their consent ; and—I love you so dearly, you won't refuse yours."

But Berrie did refuse. The little woman is made of sterner stuff than Captain Comyns has any idea of, and is not to be deceived by any amount of tender words or careful delicacy. She knows quite well that Randal was not aware of her fearful malady and disfigurement before he came to Stanefell. She knows, too, with a terrible sense of shame in the knowledge, that she betrayed her own heart to him in that luckless meeting at Hexham ; and these two facts alone would prevent her from ever believing that his

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present proposal could originate in anything but an overstrained sense of honour and compassion.

“For even if it were not so, I should always think it was, and be so miserable in the thought that I should want to run away and drown myself,” she tells herself with passionate tears, as she faces that terribly altered image in the glass. “Think of even seeing the change that would come over his face when he first looked at me! No, I couldn’t bear it. I would rather I never saw him again. Then, at any rate, he can think of me as no worse than the girl he used to ramble about with here, and in whom, even then, he found so many faults and short-comings that he had a great fight with himself (he told me so) to make up his mind to like me at all.”

So she hardens herself against his loving petition, and answers it with three badly-written lines—poor child! it is hard work to write when you are shaking with sobs—telling him that it is quite impossible for her to see him, “and it would be no use, for I could not marry you now. I do not want to. I won’t even tell you why. You would argue with me; and I can’t argue—now. Besides nothing you could say will make me change my mind, and you will only pain me by saying it. Please forgive me; I cannot help it, and good-bye.”

As heartless, shameless, cold and cruel an epistle as a woman ever wrote to a man who loved her, and who had travelled over a hundred miles to find her and tell her so. She passes that verdict on it herself as she reads it over, and decides that no one with any spirit or feeling could want to have

more to do with the girl who could be capable of penning it. She will not even put in one soft or kindly word, lest it may seem like a sign of weakness and appeal to him ; and yet—well, I suppose affectations of heartlessness may be too overdone to be natural ; or perhaps Randal, like most other people of any acumen, can read between the lines on occasions. At any rate the sole result of her letter is this second visit, the ill-success of which we have seen.

Outside the autumn sunshine is dancing in a myriad, myriad, gleaming particles on the green-blue waters of the bay, and the waves rush laughing in upon the beach and then retire, leaving behind them little shining rings of foam upon the wet, brown sands ; and all the green, ferny woods have changed to red and gold and russet, draping the hills with close-ranked folds of richest

colour ; and a faint pearly haze hangs over Humphrey's Head, and the little wooded islet in the curve of the bay looks like a gleaming jewel, all fire and bronze, throned upon the silvery foam ; and by-and-by in rushes Ernie, his tangled yellow curls hanging over his face, his sailor's jersey soaked with sand and sea water, his bare, pink legs destitute of shoes and stockings, and a great trailing mass of green and crimson seaweed dangling from one hand as he shouts out :

“Berrie, why ever don't you come out ? It's such a grand day ; all the people in the place are out but you. And just look at my seaweeds ! Why what's the matter, sis ? Are you crying ?”

Much ashamed of herself, yet with an unedifying disregard for truth, Berrie stumbles to her feet and falters out a

denial, trying to distract Ernie's attention from herself by proffers of a basin to hold his seaweed, but the inquisitive eyes of childhood are not to be so easily diverted.

"But, Berrie, you have been crying. You're crying now, and your eyes are as red as lobsters. You have made yourself ugly. What's the matter? Has anyone been bothering you? Oh, perhaps that man did mean you after all! I thought he was chaffing."

"What man, Ernie?"

"Oh, a tall fellow in grey, with spectacles. Not old, though, looked as if he only put on specs for fun. I never saw him before in my life, but he came up to me just now and said in sharp sort o' way: 'What's your name, my boy?' 'Ernest Samuel Brown,' said I, 'what's yours?' But of course he hadn't the civility to answer. He only

said half to himself: 'So I thought,' and then: 'Well, my man, give this message to your sister for me,' and with that he went off into a lot of rigmarole. I don't believe I remember it now."

"Oh, but, Ernie, you must remember. Try," Berrie cries, almost ready to stamp with that impatience which I fear is normal to her ill-disciplined nature.

"Well, but I only thought he was chaffing at the time. I know it was something about being obliged to bow to your decissors—decision—what's the word? It was a lie, anyhow, for he was standing up as stiff as a ramrod all the while; but that you had done him a great injury, and he thought that some day, because you had a kind heart, you would be sorry for it."

Sorry! The girl's face is quivering now, and her eyes filling again with

large, rebellious tears. She can hardly find voice to ask:

“What did you say, Ernie?”

But Ernie is fortunately too busy in spreading out his seaweeds in the basin to notice her just now, and answers very cheerfully:

“I? Oh, I told him to go along with him, for I didn’t believe he knew my sister at all; and if he did he could give you his messages himself. ‘No, I can’t,’ said he, ‘for she won’t let me. Anyhow, tell her I am going away now, and if I don’t make haste I shall miss the train.’ He was right enough there, for it was just coming in as he spoke, and he had to rush off or he wouldn’t have caught it.”

“But he did?” Berrie asks a little breathlessly.



“Catch it? Oh yes, he’d nothing to carry but a little black bag, and he was a great long-legged fellow.”

“I say, sis, do you know him? and what did he mean? Oh! I say, there are the fishing boats coming in. Do come down on the beach and look at them.”

But Berrie evades the questions, and answers the request with a negative. She has a bad headache, she says, which is true, and the sun would make it worse; so Ernie sallies forth again by himself; and his sister, left alone, throws herself down on the hard little horsehair sofa under the window, and hiding her poor, marred face in the cushions, lets her tears flow afresh unchecked. She has been victorious, Ernie’s “message” confirms it; but like a greater conqueror she feels inclined to cry out, “Another such victory and I shall be

ruined!" Even the child's cheerfulness and plain-spoken comments on her appearance are an additional wound to her, for indeed it is he—though he does not know it, poor boy—to whom she is indebted for the spoiling of her life's happiness; and it says something for the sharp-tongued little woman's sweetness at core that she feels no grudge against him for the same. She cries herself to sleep at last, as if she were a child herself; a feat all the easier because the agitation of Randal's arrival prevented her from closing her eyes on the previous night; and I suppose it is the utter weariness of soul and body which makes her slumber on for the rest of the afternoon, until the return of Ernie in a ravenous mood for his tea puts any further indulgence in either sleep or sorrow out of the question.

There are two letters on the breakfast-table for her when she comes down next morning. From Randal either of them? No, certainly not! Why should they be, when that gentleman is probably breakfasting in London, if not in Dingleberry itself, at that moment, and full of a righteous wrath and scorn which will effectually deter him from ever wishing to address a letter to Miss Barbara Brown again. It is not likely that she will ever hear from him again, unless he were to feel grateful enough in time for her double rejection of him to be on friendly terms with her again; and even then friendship does not always mean correspondence, especially in respect to men. No; that page in her life must be finally closed by now. She has decided that of her own act and will; and, therefore, why she should first make a frantic rush at the

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said epistles, and then, after gazing at them for a moment with wistful, misty eyes, drop them limply on to the tablecloth, and proceed to pour tea into her own cup and milk into Ernie's porridge, without further concern as to their contents, is a question hard to solve.

Yes, one of them ought not to be without interest to her, seeing that it contains mention of the very gentleman who has so early departed, as she discovers by-and-by, when she summons up energy enough to open it.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### LOST IN THE SEA MISTS.

THE letter in question is from Mrs. Henniker, and that venerable lady is not in her pleasantest mood. For one thing, she had just had time to get thoroughly tired of having no one to cater for her and find fault with except Parker the acidulous, and had made up her mind accordingly to condone her granddaughter's rebellious conduct, and send for her back when the news of the latter's illness—and such an illness!—put that idea to flight for ever.

Letter after letter of reproach—not to

use so vulgar a term as abuse—has Berrie's grandmother already written to Berrie's father and stepmother during the progress of the girl's illness; but this is the first the latter herself has received, Mrs. Henniker having a salutary dread of infection, and not being disposed to risk the danger of an answer from her granddaughter until she is fully assured that the latter is so far advanced on the road to health that there can be not the slightest danger in a correspondence with her.

“Especially as you know Miss Barbara's handwriting,” she tells Parker, “and therefore if she should write, you would of course be careful to pour spirits of camphor or Condyl's fluid over the letter *directly* it arrived, and then hold it near a bright fire till it was dry before you thought of reading it to me.”

So it is that Berrie only now hears, what her parents have considerately kept from her before, of the storm of epistolary castigation to which they have been subjected for allowing her to expose herself to the risk which has proved so very real a one ; and at the same time receives her own share which has certainly not lost in pungency from keeping.

In truth Mrs. Henniker has cause to consider herself as illused. Did she not take the girl out of her vulgar family and pay for her education herself, sparing no money or trouble so that it might be complete enough to render its object a useful and agreeable companion to her whenever she was at home or abroad ? And what right had Berrie, after that, first to engage herself to a ploughman and forsake her grandmother for him, and then to contract

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a loathsome disease for no earthly end save to render herself useless and ineligible to the old lady for a couple of years to come.

“If, indeed, you are ever fit to look at again,” she writes, after exhausting herself with the above reproaches, “for nothing leaves the features so thick and ugly as small-pox, and, of course, all hopes of marrying you decently are over. I only hope you are beginning to repent of your ingratitude and misconduct. If you are not, perhaps you will do so when I tell you that I saw in *The Times* not long ago an announcement of the death of Sir Comyn Comyns, of Dingleberry Hall, Norfolk, leaving property worth something like three thousand a year to his only surviving son, Randal Comyns, late captain in the Royal Marines. That’s the man



who was so smitten with you at Grange, and who would, I daresay, have married you and made you Lady Comyns if you had only listened to me and played your cards properly. I don't doubt he's congratulating himself heartily at present on his escape; but all the same you might have had him at the time with my help, and if you hadn't been infatuated with that atrocious young ploughman. I hear he has jilted you since then, and now by this last idiotic act, etc., etc."

For the letter stretches itself out over three sheets and a half, and Berrie is slightly wearied by the time that she gets to the end. She does not much mind. In the old days she waited on her grandmother deftly, did her bidding and made herself as pleasant and companionable as she could; but it cannot be said that she

loved or was fond of the old lady. Perhaps grandmamma's temper was hardly conducive to that feeling; and the only regret she has over their parting is that, as Mrs. Henniker did undoubtedly go to a good deal of expense in her behalf, she was not allowed to stay and "work it out" until the debt had become equal on both sides. She is sorry for that now because it offends her strong sense of honesty; but that is all.

As for the news about Randal, it provokes a quick start, a blush, and a sad little smile—nothing more. Strangely enough and practical as she usually is, the fact of her lover's new position in the world had never dawned on her even when his own letter told her of his father's death; and in answering it she had addressed hers to "Captain Comyns" as usual. Now, the

sudden realisation that he is Sir Randal and a wealthy baronet, only makes her recognise more fully the wisdom of her decision ; and if it is a little pleasure to her woman's heart to feel that his change of circumstances has only made him more ready and eager in his endeavours to win her, it would be hard to grudge her that small gratification.

Her other letter is from the faithful Edla von Freilo, and if it has been said that friendship does not always imply correspondence in the case of mankind, the contrary may be as safely averred with regard to women. Neither few nor brief have been the epistles from Fraulein von Freilo already received by her friend during her illness and convalescence ; and this one, no less voluminous nor affectionate than usual, is to inform her that the post of

English teacher is vacant in the school wherein Fraulein Edla herself instructs a select few among the rising generation of Saxony; and that she is commissioned to offer it to her "much heart-beloved and soul-in-soul-united friend," Barberry Brown.

"Come then, thou dearest little loved one, without making to thyself clogs of delay," writes the impassionate and poetic Edla, "and be happy once more in the intellect-expansiveness and heart-effluence of our ancient comradeship. Now truly I may own that my own heart uplept with joy-gladness when I heard that thou hadst broken the betrothal-chain of the worthy-and-much-to-be-respected Herr Cousin. Nay, I weep not even that you tell me you are ugly. Ugly? There is no such word for the mind; and for body-ugliness, what worth

is it ? Here, as thou knowest, Fraulein Schwartz and her sister were always of likeness more to the ungainly-rinded hippopotamus than the bird of paradise ; and I, thy friend, more than ever since I have seen the perils occasioned thee by thy pretty, *mutine* face, have I eschewed body-beauty. Also my hair, never thick like thine, has almost all fallen off from heat of brain-labouring, and I wear smoked spectacles constantly for that my eyes are so weak. Come then, little, growing one, and spread thy soul-wings here near to the gardens where the immortal Goethe once refreshed his thirst, and where Wagner's divine 'Tannhauser' is being now nightly performed to reciprocatorily-entranced spirits at six marken a seat."

Berrie is a long way from her Grange lodgings when she finishes this epistle.

She has taken the two letters with her to read out walking, Ernie having departed to the beach, as usual, with a small friend, a little boy who has been sent down here with his nurse to recover from a very bad attack of measles. They lodge in the same house with Barberry and her brother; and the maid is a civil, kind young woman, not at all disinclined to oblige the young lady downstairs at times by giving an eye to Ernie as well as to her own charge; so, having missed her walk yesterday, and feeling badly in want of fresh air to give her nerves the tone they have lost, Berrie has sallied out for a long tramp by herself, and has left Grange and even the little neighbouring village of Cark far out of sight before she sits down to rest on a grassy knoll at the edge of the Leven Sands.

A strange-looking place, this huge expanse of sands, dividing the picturesque lake country from the busy manufacturing peninsula of Ulverston and Barrow, three miles broad at its widest end, and narrowing up at the furthest point into the little mouth of the river Leven, which trickles away in sundry shining streamlets through the yellow sand down to the sea, where the railway crosses it like some black gigantic snake. A wide, wet expanse of dim yellow under a faint, grey sky, stretching away as far as Berrie's eye can reach in one direction, and bounded on the other by the motionless, misty sea, intersected with glistening, shallow streams and pools of salt water, dotted over with sea birds, and here and there by the figures of one or two pedestrians plodding wearily across the broad and

dangerous track from the low grassy shores fringed with stunted oaks and bushes on one side to that where Berrie is seated, musing over her friend's letter.

It is a good day for musing, too, mild and still, with no wind in the air, and a light, misty haze spreading itself between earth and sky, and hanging like a white cloud over the sea where it advances and retreats with each coming or departing wave like some spectral dancer; but Berrie heeds little of the scene or day; her eyes are fixed on her friend's letter, and her mind is far away in the place where it was written. Yes, she can almost see it now, the homely little Saxon town where her education was finished, the "place," with its four rows of primly clipped limes planted in the form of a cross, and the raised green wooden erection in the centre,



where the band played of an evening ; the tiny opera house, round, and with an overhanging roof like a Chinaman's hat, where the women took their knitting and the men their pipes, and where Wagner and Liszt used to be rehearsed to the clink of the knitting-needles and the fumes of tobacco ; the "bier garten," with its little iron tables and wooden benches, its mossy apple trees, and giant hollyhocks and dahlias, and the stunted acacia, under which the "immortal Goethe" was once reported to have sat while he partook of a glass of "kirschwasser ;" last, not least, the square white house, with its immaculately polished door-knocker, and brilliant green venetians, where the Frauleins Schwartz conducted their college for young ladies, and whence Barberry and Edla, the two prize pupils, used to sally forth every Sunday, wearing

their gold medals suspended by a broad ribbon round their necks, and marching at the head of the eighteen other young ladies to morning service at the Lutheran church on the other side of the "place." She can see it all now, almost as plainly as though it were before her eyes; and as the vision gathers force and clearness there comes with it a great temptation to go back there, to accept Edla's affectionate offer and try to take up life again where she left it, a saucy, light-hearted girl, not three years ago. Fraulein Schwartz might be like a hippopotamus—there is the sparkle of a smile in Berrie's eyes, those dark, mirthful eyes, almost the only unaltered feature in her face, as she recalls the comparison and recognises its aptness—but she and her sister were both fond and proud of their clever English pupil;

and she knows that with them she would find much more kindness and real independence, and very little more work, than when she was with her grandmother. Besides there would be Edla, the loyal and devoted friend, the lofty impassioned soul, with a mind filled with poetry and philosophy and finger-ends, instinct with all the "ologies" under the sun, with the physical courage of a mouse and the mental audacity of a Haeckel. Protected under the virgin shield of such a champion and comrade as Mdle. Von Freilo, with her lofty scorn of "body-beauty," would she not be safe and happy, safe from temptation to remember where memory means only pain, and happy in constant usefulness, and a faithful and devoted friendship? And with Ernie and Louie at boarding-school, as they will be after Easter;

and Josh at home helping Tom on the farm, she can be better spared than formerly ; while the absence of Philip as a paying inmate, and the expenses consequent on Dolly's wedding outfit, render it the more incumbent on her to contribute something towards the family support : certainly not to burden them with her own. But then ought that something to be earned away from England, when her father is so weak and failing as she knows him to be ? Would she ever forgive herself if he were to get worse, perhaps die, with her away in another country, and not even able to hasten to him at a moment's notice ? Is it not indeed the mere impulse of a selfish coward which prompts this desire to fly away and seek a refuge in that little far-off Saxon town ?

It is a puzzling question, difficult to

answer with brain and heart as sad and weary as hers are to-day : and she rouses herself from it at last with a shiver, to find that she is very cold, and that the curly rings of hair on her temples are growing limp and clammy with the cold mist which enfolds her. The tide has been coming in since she sat down, so that the railway, which before drew its black curves over the wet sands, now seems to float upon the bosom of a broad and rippling expanse of leaden sea ; and the fog marching with the latter almost obliterates it from view, and stretches its pale arms onwards and outwards in a huge half-circle embracing both sides of the shore. Looking back along the rough and stony by-road by which she has come, Barberry sees to her disgust that this mist has filled its narrow width with remark-

able compactness; and the prospect of setting out on her homeward route through it is the reverse of cheering. She knows enough, however, of these sea fogs to be aware that they are frequently as transient and capricious in their stay as they are sudden in their appearance, and that even the slightest change of wind in this land of variable air currents would be quite sufficient to dissipate the present haze. Besides, thick and cheerless as it is to sea and eastward, it is still clear and even bright along the inland track of the sands; and not very far off the sun is shining faintly through the haze upon a strip of yellow sand and glimmering water, from which a little group of men with blue jerseys and bare red legs and arms, are busy dragging their shrimping nets; their curved and straining shadows thrown sharply upon

the ribbed wet surface where they are standing.

There are moods in which some trivial discomfort will make trouble and suffering, hitherto patiently borne, suddenly intolerable. In this mood of Berrie's it seems to her impossible to face the stony lane and the fog. Better to go on into the sunshine and trust to the mists clearing away before she needs to turn. It is smooth and easy walking on the sands, and even if it leads her farther on her onward route than she had meant to go, what of that? She cannot have gone more than five or six miles at present; and she is a girl who ordinarily thinks little of twelve or even fifteen. So, somewhat wilfully, she rises from the grassy bank where she has been resting, and, turning her face inland, walks onward, not following a very direct route,

in consequence of the numerous little streams of brackish water which wind about in every direction, obliging her either to jump over them or turn out of their way; but with her mind too full of the conflicting ideas occasioned by Randal Comyns' late visit and Edla's proposal, to care much whither she is going. By-and-by, however, a somewhat wider patch of water than usual, with a very misty margin on the further side, brings her to a sudden stop, and makes her look around her.

The sunshine she was following has disappeared. There is no sun visible anywhere now; and the shivery dampness and chilliness of the air on the back of her neck make her turn her head to discover, somewhat to her surprise, that the fog, instead of dissipating as she had hoped,



has gained considerably in density and volume, and is treading fast upon her heels and blotting out the track by which she came. To the north and north-west the way is still tolerably clear, and she can still see the outlines of the low, green shore on that side; but to pursue her road in that direction will take her still farther from home, and she has suddenly become conscious that her strength is not quite what it was before her illness; and that to get there at all will be a fatiguing task unless she sets about it at once.

Besides, these autumn sea fogs may be different from the lighter summer mists with which she was acquainted, and of greater duration than her girlish presumption had taken count of; and if so, will it be safe to go on still farther into an unknown country?

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With the depressing conviction that she has been rash in coming as far as she has done, and that she will have to retreat at once and make her way back in the teeth of this thick white vapour which chills her to the bone and hangs upon her hair and eyelashes like a shower of rain, she turns her face bravely towards it and begins to plod homeward in a still soberer mood than she has come.

The fog plods too. It plods faster than Berrie, and before she has gone many yards is all round her on the one side as well as the other.

It thickens too. At first she could not see the banks or trees in the distance. By-and-by she cannot see a dozen yards; a few minutes later it is with difficulty she can make out objects an arm's length from her.

And then she begins to get frightened.

For those little teasing rivulets, curling about the sands like narrow white snakes, which she could easily avoid or cross while it was clear, become veritable serpents in her path at present. To be continually jumping over them is fatiguing work ; and in trying to skirt round some she fancies that she has gone out of her way, and retraces her steps ; then, seeing nothing but fog on all sides of her, becomes bewildered, and cannot even make up her mind whether the stream she is now facing is the one which turned her before. If she could but catch a glimpse of those shrimping men now it would be a vast comfort to her ; but they have disappeared altogether, sucked long since into the sea mist ; and it is only by keeping her face towards the

wind that she can judge at all whether she is pursuing the right direction. But, unguessed at by her, the wind has veered slightly since she set out; and it is only by feeling that she has walked much farther than she need have done, that the suspicion that she has wandered from her way begins to grow upon her. Then she gets desperate and determines to go straight on and not turn for water or anything, in the hope that she will come to *terra firma* at last.

At the same moment it flashes upon her mind that she has read somewhere of a whole party being caught in one of these fogs, and lost in a quicksand while crossing these wastes at night; and in the terror of the idea her nerves give way, and she screams aloud.

Somewhere, far away, she seems to hear

the echo of her screams. A seagull perhaps; or perhaps some other lost creature as helpless as herself.

She has come to a very wide stream now. Even by stooping down to its level she cannot see to the other side; but it seems to extend a long way on either side, and she is not minded to diverge again from her route. Better to walk through it. She will wet her feet, of course; but she is so wet already that that will hardly matter. It is not to be wet feet only, however. The first three steps carry her over her insteps, a couple more and she is up to her ankles. The cold water is swirling round her, deepening every instant, and still there is no sign of the other side. Only, at that moment, something like a dim red eye seems to glare through the fog in front of her. There is a shrill, prolonged scream,

a longer muffled roar and rattle trembling over the water for an indefinite distance; and in the same instant Berrie shrieks and shrieks again, with an agony of terror which there is no controlling. It is the train to Ulverston which has just passed in front of her; and she is walking straight out to sea. She has found out her mistake just as the water is half way to her knees!

This time, however, there is no doubt as to her cry being answered. A long, high-pitched shout comes pealing through the mist in her rear, and as she replies to it in an almost frenzy of appeal she can even distinguish the words it says.

“Stop! Stand still! For God’s sake, stop!”

It is a needless injunction, for she has no power now to move or even turn. Terror has taken from her all her remaining

force, save that of uttering cry after cry ; but by good fortune this is a better guide to the invisible person in her rear than any movement on her part could be ; and the answering shout comes nearer and nearer, till in a minute she sees the dim figure of a man looming through the fog ; and in another second it has strode forward, there is a hasty splash in the water at her side, strong arms have caught and lifted her, and she is being carried back from the living death on which a moment past she was rushing.

When next Berrie opens her eyes she is seated on a rock, her head leaning against the rough, warm overcoat which covers a man's shoulder, and his hand holding a little flask of brandy to her lips and trying to make her swallow a few drops of the contents.

And the man is Randal Comyns!

She has not fainted. Fainting is always romantic, sometimes pleasant; but it is an achievement of which Berrie has never yet been capable in all her life. She has not been unconscious enough to be doubtful of the identity of the person so anxiously bending over her; scarcely to be startled by it. When she saw him coming through the fog to her, it seemed as if she had known the sound of his voice all along, and had cried to him for aid. Of course he would give it. Has he not always come when she most wanted him, when she was lost on the Hampsfell, and in her loneliness at Hexham? and now—— But the fright and fatigue have weakened her a good deal, and her senses are still dizzy and confused from her swift passage across



the misty sands in those strong arms. She does not even yet realise that she is safe, or where they are, or what has happened to her; and when Randal makes a movement to pull off his overcoat, that he may wrap it round her, she only clings more closely to him with weak trembling fingers, and begs him not to leave her yet, not to go away.

“Do you think it likely?” Randal says, smiling at her. “A fine person *you* are to be trusted alone? But you never will be, again; so make up your mind to it. This is the last time.” And then, in his great gladness at having rescued her, and seeing that she is uninjured, he stoops his face lower over the little white one lying on his breast, and kisses her; kisses her brow, and eyes, and

lips; not as he kissed her once before, but with a kind of tender, happy proprietorship, which seems to take from her all power of resistance or reproach. What good indeed in either? She has done all she could already, and to what avail? He is stronger than she, and has baffled her even when she thought him most obedient. Besides, her mind does not seem strong enough to argue at present, even with herself. It was all very well and easy to do that when she was sad and alone in the security of her own apartments, and with no loving voice near to soothe or reason with her. Now she is only conscious of one thing, he is holding her in his arms; and she loves him, loves him better than all the world. In all that world there can be no sweeter shelter for her.

And at this moment the feeble, fickle breeze which has been wavering so long between south and east, and south again, gathers force and takes a sudden cant to the north-east; and, lo! as it does so, a change like a transformation comes over everything, for the white mist-wreaths unfold and roll apart, blown backwards over the waves like the snowy portals of the tents of God; and as they drift asunder, the sun's rays, hidden behind them, turn each silvery fold to a thousand opaline tints of rose, and pearl, and azure; and the blue sky shines out with only a tender haze across it, and a deeper turquoise spreads and widens upon the bosom of the sea, and each little shallow pool and streamlet in all that broad expanse of shifting yellow sand glitters like a hand-

ful of diamonds cast down upon a bed of gold ; and then out rides the sun himself, in all his genial majesty, gilding sea and shore, and grey rock and grassy bank, and sending one broad ray right down on Barberry's face, dazzling and glorifying her like a benediction.

She can see its reflection in Randal's as he kneels beside her, holding her to him with such a look of perfect, proud content and happiness as she has never seen there yet ; and before that vision all thought of herself or of her own ugliness, which seemed so terrible awhile back to her foolish heart, fades utterly away, like the mists themselves before the sun.

As Edla von Freilo would say, there is no such word as ugliness in love ; and

there is nothing but love, love grateful and triumphant, in Randal's eyes as he gazes at her.

The sunshine has come to both of them.

THE END.

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